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VOL. V.

\$2.50
a Year.

PUBLISHED WEEKLY BY BEADLE AND ADAMS,
No. 98 William Street, New York.

Price,
Five Cents. No. 57.



HE GASPED FOR BREATH; HIS PASSION, WILD AND UNCONTROLLED AT ALL TIMES, WAS CHOKING HIM.

WITHOUT MERCY.

BY BARTLEY T. CAMPBELL

CHAPTER I.

ON THE MISSISSIPPI.

TWENTY years ago Holcombe Hall was the most ancient and picturesque residence in the parish of St. James, if not the finest in the State of Louisiana. Some time in the last decade of

the last century, Pellisse Gaspard, a Spanish noble, falling into disfavor at court, escaped the galleys by flying across the Pyrenees to France, and thence to Louisiana. His appetite for routs and gay scenes had become thoroughly sated at Madrid, and on his arrival in the New World, he betook himself to this lonely spot on the bank of the broad, sweeping Mississippi, and built a new home.

Being his own architect, the structure, as a consequence, partook of the gloomy massive-

ness of the half-Spanish, half-Moorish piles that are to be seen on every hand in Granada.

There was a long hall of granite, the windows of which were small and filled with diamond-shaped panes; a square tower on the right of the main entrance lifted its battlemented head full twenty feet from the red-tiled roof, and in this tower—which Gaspard named after his child Rupert—hung a chime of deep-sounding bells. The sole business of these bells was to chronicle the holidays of the calendar, ringing out merry music on feasts and dolefully knelling the fasts. The interior was finished in polished oak, the lower rooms being inlaid with cedar, and the ceilings frescoed in the most elaborate manner by a master hand.

When Pellisse Gaspard died, in 1832, he left his immense plantation to his son, without reservation; stipulating, however, in his will, that the old mansion should not be torn down under any circumstances, and that the bells in Rupert's Tower should not only ring out the fasts and feasts of the church in all the future years as they had done in the past, but that, on the last day of every succeeding October—that being All Saints' Day—they should be tolled from noon until midnight.

After his father's death, Rupert Gaspard leased the homestead for the period of fifty years to an Englishman named Harold Holcombe, who agreed to never touch or attempt to remodel the place, and to see to it that the bells were rung according to the wish expressed in old Pellisse's will.

Where Rupert went to no one could tell, not even the new tenant, who for sixteen years had been sending to his attorney in New Orleans the rental of the place.

If Pellisse Gaspard was an odd man, his English successor was more eccentric still. Of the five hundred acres that stretched up and down the river, three hundred were covered with stubble and forest trees, the vegetation being so dense that it was only with great difficulty one could make his way through it.

A dozen slaves cultivated—in a sort of way at least—the remaining two hundred; but over all the plantation brooded the spirit of neglect.

When Harold Holcombe first settled here, he was a tall, handsome man of eight and thirty, or thereabouts, but sixteen years silvered his long hair and plowed his swarthy cheek with many a furrow, so that he looked fully ten years older than he really was.

There were but two white persons in the place besides himself. One of these was Tom Toy, his confidential servant and secretary, and the other—a sweet, gentle girl of seventeen—was called Hester Corwin. She had gray eyes, large, full and wondering; lips, red and dewy as the heart of a rose; a mass of silken brown hair, and a lithe, slender, girlish figure, which gave promise of matchless grace in riper years.

Harold called her his niece, but the Hargraves, on the next plantation, thought she was a nearer kin, since his whole existence seemed to be wrapt up in her, while old Mima, the colored housekeeper, used to shake her head when she saw the old man fondle little Hester, and say: "Lor' help us; dis am de queerest, queerest wo'ld. Day's no tellin' what am comin'

roun'. Not a bit—no tellin'—no indeedy—not a bit."

She had just returned from a Northern boarding-school, where she had spent the greater part of two years, and now she began to realize how silent and gloomy her former life at Holcombe Hall had been.

All the dreary hours of this October day she had sat up in her little bandbox of a room, looking out at the swollen Mississippi, while the warm rain beat an even tattoo on her window, and the red oaks dripped, and the moss hung limp, and the gray fog curtained in every thing.

She felt lonesome. The house was so still, and her thoughts would, despite her, fly longingly back to her schoolmates. And then, finally, she fell to dreaming—as girls just on the threshold of life will dream, and plan, and wonder what the future has in store for them.

The grayish twilight was stealing down from the wet sky, and creeping over the wet earth, and there were bright lights gleaming from the distant negro-quarters, and red and green lights gleaming from the smoke-stack of a passing steamer.

"It's getting dark up here," she said, as the steamer disappeared in the fog, "and I must go down and see what uncle is doing. Perhaps he is as lonely as I am."

She arose as she said this, and drawing down the blinds to shut out the uncertain light, she tripped down the dark stairs. At the foot of the hall she met Mima, the ebon face of whom was glistening with tears.

"Wha hev ye bin, honey chile?" asked the poor old negress.

"Up in my room, auntie," was the reply. "But, what's the matter? you're crying!"

"Yes, I know it, honey; but we all got a shock jist now, chile. De ole man has got one uv his fits ag'in. He's awful bad. I nebber seen him so bad like. Yes, Missah Hess, when 'Lijah called me in, I t'ot dot de lief was done gone, suh."

Hester did not wait for any more, but, pushing by Mima, rushed into the library.

The old man, who was lying on a lounge before the fire, was trembling from head to foot as if with ague; his eyes were closed tight, and his teeth, long and white, were buried in his ashen nether lip, from which a red drop of blood oozed out upon his white cravat.

Tom Toy stood over him, bathing his wrists in camphor, and brushing back his thin white hair with a caressing motion.

"Hush-sh, miss!" he said, turning to Hester and putting his finger upon his lip. "He'il be all right now, in a minute or so. Keep quiet; he's a-coming to again."

"Oh, Mr. Toy! has he been very ill? Is there any danger?"

"No, no danger," replied Toy, without looking up. "And I've seen him a hundred times worse; but he's bad enough not to be bothered, miss." Then after an instant he continued, looking into the face of Hester, who had fallen upon her knees by the side of the couch: "It won't do him any good to see you here now."

"Why?" and there was wonderment in the girl's face as she put the query.

"Well, because—because—"

The old man turned suddenly, opened his eyes, and exclaimed:

"She is here again! I saw her pointing at me as she did on that terrible night—"

"Mr. Holcombe! Mr. Holcombe!" cried Toy, in alarm; "don't go on in that way. Miss Hester's here. Remember Miss Hester is at your side!"

Old Harold's face became whiter still, and his great large eyes stared up into Toy's.

"Here? Here did you say, Tom?" he muttered. "Where? where did you say Hester was?"

"At your side, uncle," answered the girl, creeping closer to the questioner, and taking one of his burning hands between both of hers.

The caress was so tender, so shy, so much like Hester, that the half-unconscious man recognized her at once.

"Darling, you have just come in, have you not?" he asked, rising upon one elbow and brushing his thin gray hairs out of his eyes with his disengaged hand.

"Yes," she replied. "Mima told me you were ill."

Harold looked up at Toy, as if for confirmation of this, and the latter stammered out:

"I told you she was here as soon as she came. There *was* nothing passed."

This was said in a mysterious way, that sounded oddly, even to the young girl, who now began to think there was a secret between master and man, of which she was not only not cognizant, but of which she was to be kept in profound ignorance, for some reason or another, and this thought amounted almost to a conviction when old Harold knit his brows and scowled Tom into silence.

"Well, no matter; I'm better now," and old Harold Holcombe waved his hand at Toy. "You can go, Tom."

The latter obeyed with alacrity, going off on tiptoe, and turning at the door to return Mr. Holcombe's formal bow.

The most rigid etiquette was observed at Holcombe Hall.

CHAPTER II.

THE HEIRS.

WHEN Toy's footsteps had completely died away, Harold turned to Hester, and taking her pretty face between his wrinkled, nervous palms, gazed mutely into its beauty for a moment. Then he drew a long sigh of relief, and said:

"Hester, my child, do you know how old you are?"

"Yes, sir," with eyes cast shyly down.

"How old, then?"

"Seventeen, aunt Mima says."

The old man knit his brows. "How came she to speak of your age?"

"She told me when I came home from school."

"Ah!" Another pause. "Did she say anything else?"

"About what?"

"Well, anything; about your coming here, or about your—your"—hesitating—"your mother."

"Nothing; only she said ma was a pretty

woman, and that I looked like her some," with a blush.

"And that was all, eh?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, Hester, you must not talk with Mima. As you know, she is beneath you; she is your slave. You should remember that you are the heiress to Holcombe Hall, and that confidential conversations should only be held with those who are actually your equal.

"But I was not—"

"There, there! I was only advising, not scolding you; therefore you need not trouble yourself with going into a defense of your conduct. But, you are now seventeen, and quite a young woman. It is time you should be thinking of settling in life."

The girl glanced coyly up, but did not speak, and Harold continued:

"You have often heard me speaking of your cousin Tracy, have you not?"

"Yes, sir," with a deepening blush.

"Well, his father having died penniless in London, some five years ago, I ordered the boy to be sent to Eton to complete his education. He is now twenty-three, and my heir. Do you comprehend me?"

"Not exactly, sir."

"Well, to be more explicit, my estates in Lincolnshire must not pass out of the family; therefore it is my wish, and it has been my cherished dream for years and years, to marry you to Tracy. You will thus become my joint heirs, and I can die happy when I see the only two beings I love on this wide earth so united."

Hester's heart gave a wild bound, not of joy, nor of sorrow either, but of surprise. This was such a sudden revelation; and she had never thought of marriage, except in that vague way in which young girls think of such things.

"But, uncle, cousin Tracy may not—" She stopped suddenly, and cast her eyes upon the floor.

"May not what? May not come home, do you mean? There need be no fear of that. I have sent for him, and the next steamer up the Mississippi may bring him here. Anyway, my child, a fortnight at the furthest will bring you face to face."

"But," said Hester, interrupting him, "he may not like me when he does come, and I—"

"May not like him, eh? Is that what you would say? I supposed so. I expected some such foolish speech; girls' heads nowadays are filled with such ridiculous moonshine and nonsense." His face was livid as he continued: "I have my heart too firmly, deeply set on this matter to permit the foolish whims of either you or Tracy to upset me. If you both make up your minds, however, to hate each other at first sight, of course you have a perfect right to do so, but it will be all the worse for him. I'll make him bear a part of my burden—I'll—"

He gasped for breath; his passion, wild and uncontrolled at all times, was choking him.

"Will I go to my room, uncle?" asked the girl, in dismay, and anxious to be alone with her thoughts.

There was no reply for a moment. Then, with an effort, Harold said:

"You will forgive me; I speak too harshly to

you, I know, but I have built all my hopes on this union, my child—all my hopes, and it's a terrible thing to have the labor of ten years blasted by a single breath. Don't you think so?"

"Yes," in a very low voice.

"But," he added, coaxingly, "you will not make up your mind to hate him, will you? You will try to love your cousin—for—for my sake?"

She wound her arms tight about his neck, and said, "I will try."

He kissed her cheek, and muttered to himself, "If Annette were living now, she might forgive me, but the dead have no mercy, no mercy."

The rain splashing against the panes; the wind moaning among the trees, and the beating of that old man's heart, was all that could be heard, until Toy crossed the threshold, and said:

"If you please, master, tea is waiting."

"Very good, Toy. We'll go now."

The servant withdrew, and Harold added, "We are going to be better friends than ever, Hester. Will you give me your hand on that?"

She gave him both, with a child's impetuous confidence, and leaning on his arm, they sauntered off to the supper-room.

It was a ceremonious meal. Harold sat at the head of the table, which glittered with polished silver; Hester occupied a place at his right, and Toy flitted back and forward from the sideboard with all the gravity of a justice wielding his baton for the first time. Very little was said, although the meal lasted nearly an hour, and when it was over Harold returned to the library, and Hester escaped to her chamber.

CHAPTER III.

BEYOND THE ATLANTIC.

A LITTLE English seaport, with a long line of chalky cliffs flanking it on the north and east; a low pier, falling into ruin, jutting out into the Channel, and a wide expanse of waters stretching off toward France. Three dozen houses—all plain, even to severity—and one wide, unpaved street, that began at the pier and ended in the high grass beneath the cliffs. This was all—and the all was called Digby.

It might have been more; indeed, most people, fifty years ago, thought it would be a place of great maritime importance; but the engineers who planned the railway from Dover to London thought otherwise, and thereby failed to raise Digby into distinction by making it what all its inhabitants had fondly hoped it would some day become—the terminus of a great line.

But, notwithstanding this disappointment, happy persons were to be found in the gray old town, and none more so than sweet Dora Linfield, the rector's daughter, as she tore open a London letter and glanced at the familiar handwriting through her tears.

"Oh, he's coming down," she cried, kissing the letter, "to tell me something of importance!"

Her mother, knitting by the window, raised her eyes in surprise, and asked:

"Who is coming down?"

"Why, Tracy Cuthbert, to be sure!" and saying this, Dora sped away to a little cosy room in the highest part of the rectory, where she took the letter from its temporary hiding-place in her bosom, and read it over, again and again.

Tracy Cuthbert would have envied that blue sheet of imperial note had he seen how it was pressed to Dora's red lips and held up against her eyes, where the glad tears were shining like pearls on the long, silken, fringe-like lashes.

Of course they were lovers; had been devoted to each other ever since Tracy met Dora one sunlit day at Margate and saved her from falling down the great stairway, by catching her in his arms. This introduction was followed by a visit, the next spring, to Digby, where Tracy remained long enough to read Virgil with the rector, and Ovid with his charming child.

It was a peculiar love affair, taking it altogether, for everybody seemed satisfied, and the young couple were intensely happy.

"And now, I do wonder what's bringing him down?" mused the girl. "He did not expect to get off from London until Hallow Eve. Perhaps—" and here she stopped to think, biting the corners of the letter, by way of assisting her memory, or because she did not know what she was doing.

Before she could work out the conjecture there was a tap at the door, and in response to her invitation her father, a quiet, grave man, with blue eyes like her own, and auburn hair combed meekly away from his forehead, entered.

"My child," he began, "your mother informs me that Mr. Tracy Cuthbert proposes paying us a visit, and that you have received a letter notifying us of the fact."

He reached out his hand for the note. Dora blushed. There were things in that letter, as there doubtless are in all love missives, that she would much prefer keeping a secret from every eye, but she could not deny that serene matter-of-fact demand, and so gave it to him.

He took out his glasses with the greatest deliberation, rubbed them with a piece of chamois he always carried for that purpose, and, after carefully adjusting them, opened the letter with what Dora thought a very cold air indeed, and began to read.

There was not the slightest trace of emotion on his face as he read; had the four pages been blank he could not have maintained a more stolid exterior. It really seemed as if he had expected to find just what he had found.

"You can see Hannah, and have the spare room fitted up for his reception," was all he said, as he handed the letter back to her.

Then he took off his glasses, folded them in the chamois, and, putting them away, turned upon his heel and left the room.

Mr. Linfield was known far and wide as a very methodic man, and he deserved the reputation.

The afternoon of the next day saw Tracy Cuthbert's arrival at Digby Rectory. He was a dark, bronzed, stately fellow, not pretty, but handsome and manly-looking.

After the first outburst of welcome, and Tracy had detailed, for Mr. Linfield's benefit, the latest London gossip, he was about to propose a walk

on the beach with Dora, which Mr. Linfield anticipated by saying:

"This visit was rather impromptu, was it not?"

Tracy's eyes fell. He remembered now the purpose of his mission, and glancing at Dora, he answered:

"My uncle Harold, whose heir, as you know, I expect to be—has sent from America for me."

"But you are not going?" put in Dora.

"I must. To disobey him would be to blight all my prospects."

"And that," said Mr. Linfield, tapping his silver snuff-box, "would be a great calamity. I understand that your uncle is very wealthy."

"Yes, I believe he is reputed to be a planter of means; besides, when he left England, seventeen years ago, he was quite rich," said Tracy, and then, as if anxious to change the subject, he added: "Dora, what do you say to a walk to the pier?"

"But when do you leave us?" asked Mr. Linfield.

"A fortnight hence."

"So soon!" exclaimed Mrs. Linfield, with a touch of sadness in her voice, while Dora tried, but could not speak.

"Going so soon as that, eh?" and the rector lifted his eyebrows with an effort, by way of expressing his surprise.

Dora was at the door now—out in the slanting afternoon sunbeams, and they were crowning her head with a golden glory.

Tracy had never seen her look so beautiful, neither had he ever seen her look so sad.

When he had joined her it was with a pleasant word, but she could not trust herself to reply, and then a silence fell upon them, that was not broken until they had walked out on the deserted pier, and Dora had gazed far to the western horizon for quite a long while.

"Well, darling," said Tracy, anxious to break the silence, "have you nothing to say to me?"

She looked up, made an effort to speak, but instead, broke into tears, and he, holding her hands in his own, looked away toward the cliffs, and for fully five minutes not a word was said by either.

"Parting is very rueful work," he ventured to say, at last, "but our parting will not be for a great while, darling. A few months and I will come back for you."

"But, something may prevent your return. You know America is a great way off, and the ocean appears to me like a barrier that is very hard to overcome."

"That is but a fancy," he returned. "You have seen ships sail out of Digby a hundred times, and yet each time return. I would as soon be in America as Calais or Dieppe."

"Why so? Dieppe and Calais are but two days' journey; America is at the other end of the world!"

"Ay, true enough; but when separated at all, there might as well be leagues intervening as miles. Don't you think so?"

"I'm sure I can't. If I knew you were in Calais I should not feel so lonesome; I see vessels from Calais every now and then, but those from America go to Southampton and never pass here at all. Digby, you know, is not a cheerful place to wait for any one's return. There is no bus-

tle; no excitements, as in London, or even in Dover, and I know I shall die of sheer loneliness when—when," her voice was dying into a whisper, "when you are gone."

He made no direct reply; only pressed her hands more firmly; and set his teeth hard to prevent his lips from twitching.

Finally, they both sat down upon the old pier; the sun went out of sight, and the grayish twilight came on, and faded out into misty amber; then the moon sailed up out of the waves, and looked shyly down upon them.

At last Tracy said, after a long silence: "Dora, there is no use disguising the fact; this is a world of change, and accidents may happen the best of us."

She nestled closer to his arms, but did not reply.

"I may never see England again, or, for that matter, America either. The ocean is paved with wanderers."

She shuddered. "I know it," she replied, "Oh, it's so terrible!"

"Were such a fate to be mine," he continued, "I have an idea that it would be less hard to bear if I left one behind me on whom I would have a stronger claim than that of lover. Do you understand me, Dora?"

"I don't know—I think I do."

"Then, to be plain, darling, I would have you for my wife before we separate. Do you consent?"

She did, without speaking, but he understood her as well as if she had spoken; indeed, much better, for her yielding was unconditional, as all silent consents are.

A week passed, and, one evening, at its close, there was a quiet little wedding in the stiff, solemn-looking parlor of Digby Rectory.

The contracting parties were Tracy Cuthbert and the rector's daughter, Dora, and the witnesses consisted of Justice Pennal, the dignitary of Digby, and a half-dozen of the most prominent shopkeepers of the town.

There was very little display, in fact, no attempt at it whatever, and when the pair had been declared man and wife by the faltering, half-broken voice of the rector, and Mrs. Linfield had kissed Dora a half-dozen times, and everybody, including Justice Pennal, had congratulated them, a delightful, delicious supper followed, and the affair was over.

The next day Tracy bade his young wife adieu.

"You will write as soon as you land," she said.

"I shall write on the way and mail it on my arrival. Good-by!"

She made a great effort to utter that little word, but it stuck in her throat, and, instead of saying "good-by," she fainted.

Poor child! Could she have but seen what the merciless future had in store for her!

CHAPTER IV.

RUPERT GASPARD.

It was the evening of the fourth day after Hester Corwin had been notified of the coming of Tracy Cuthbert, when the steamer, *Lady Franklin*, bound from New Orleans to Memphis, landed in the bend immediately in front of Hol-

combe Hall, and discharged a single passenger.

The three shrill whistles, which on the western rivers always signalize a landing, and the clanging of the great bell on the hurricane-deck which followed, had called old Harold Holcombe to the river edge, and when the dark, handsome stranger leaped on the artificial bank, which guarded the plantation from overflow, he extended his hand and said:

"You are Tracy Cuthbert; I am your uncle Harold."

The stranger paused, and half-withdrew his extended hand.

"No, Mr. Holcombe, I am not your nephew."

"Not my nephew—not Tracy—"

"No."

"Then who are you?" coloring scarlet.

"Rupert Gaspard," with a bow, "the heir of Holcombe Hall."

"Indeed!" replied Harold, with some embarrassment. "This is an unexpected pleasure. You must pardon me for my abruptness, Senor Gaspard, but I am expecting a relative from England, and naturally I thought you were he."

"No need of apologies," said Rupert, smiling; "I have grown tired of foreign travel, and so I thought I would come back and stop a few months at the old Hall again."

"You are welcome, senor; very glad indeed to have your society, and I trust you will not find the place so dull."

"Thank you."

The two men turned up the brambly, overgrown path, and Rupert, whose quick eye wandered everywhere, remarked:

"The place has not changed much, Mr. Holcombe. I see you are not *en rapport* with the spirit of this inventive age."

"No; I don't care for mixing myself in every speculation that offers. All I want is a quiet, comfortable home, and that I have here. I can assure you that I am quite content."

The sigh that followed this declaration seemed to belie his words; but, though Rupert noticed this, he made no mention of it, and they entered the Hall in silence.

Hester Corwin had seen, from her chamber window, the Lady Franklin land—had seen Rupert leap ashore, and when she had seen him approach the house in company with her uncle, she—believing him of course to be Tracy—turned away to arrange her hair and prepare for the meeting that she expected must follow.

She was not satisfied with the reflection, although she was positively beautiful in her simple attire, and so she unloosed her hair, untied the blue ribbon, and set about rearranging both.

"Missa Hestah," said Bede, one of the slave girls, putting her head in at the door, "Massa wants to see ye down-stairs, right 'way."

"I'm going now," replied Hester, all in a flutter of excitement. "But, Bede, stop a moment; where is the gentleman who came up from the landing a few moments ago?"

"Down dah, in de parlo'. I golly, missah, he's de nice man! Mima says he's de ole Massah's son what built de place!"

"Built the place! What place?"

"Dis yah place whar we is in at de present moment."

Hester was beginning to see through the matter now.

"Then he is not the gentleman we was expecting from England, after all?"

"Not a bit! Mima says his name is Rupert, de same dat we call de towah aftah!"

"Rupert Gaspard?"

"Yes, missah; it's some sort uv hard, an' I guess it's dat kind, suh!"

The fluttering died out of Hester's heart, and, bidding Bede to go, she sat down a moment to reflect and collect her thoughts.

At length, without even casting a second glance in the mirror as she passed, Hester swept down the broad stairway, and into the hall.

There she stopped an instant. Unused as she was to society, meeting a person wholly a stranger to her, caused her no little embarrassment, and this she endeavored to conquer now.

She was partially successful, for, when Rupert Gaspard came forward to take her hand, after the ceremony of introduction, he thought he had never met a handsomer or more graceful girl in his life.

"I am very glad to meet you, Miss Corwin," he said.

She thanked him and sat down on a sofa at the further end of the large room, and, for the next hour, listened attentively while her uncle and the young stranger discussed topics connected with the politics and cities of Europe.

Rupert talked well; had a rich, full voice, and when he warmed up into enthusiasm, as he did when he described the wonders of the Escorial, and the grandeur of the Alhambra, Hester held her breath in admiration.

After supper, old Harold excused himself and went off to attend to some business in the library, leaving the young folks to entertain each other.

They did not get along very rapidly at first. Hester was shy, and only answered in monosyllables, but, after a while, speaking of her school life and affairs at home, she talked with a freedom and ease that astonished even herself, and when early bedtime arrived, and they separated, each felt that they had known each other a very long while indeed.

The next day, in company with Bede, the colored girl, they strolled over the plantation; visited the negro-quarters; gathered moss from the clump of red oaks, and cotton from the opening pods.

Rupert told stories of the old world, and Hester listened attentively, sometimes laughing and sometimes feeling as if she would give a good deal to have a hearty cry over some of the more sentimental.

She was easily impressed, and Rupert, seeing this, delighted in watching the shadows and sunlight come and go at his bidding.

Thus a week passed; October was far advanced, and the plantation hands were preparing for Hallow Eve. The illuminating of the graves in the church-yard—an old-country custom—was rigidly observed in these days throughout the parish of St. James, as well as on the Teche and Lafourche, and the servitors and dependents of Holcombe Hall made it a time of solemnity and display.

The nearest grave-yard was fully a half-mile from the Hall. It was a small affair, hemmed in with a hedge of sweet-brier, and consisting of two flat acres, ridged by a score of graves.

On the day before Hallow Eve, candles of wax and tallow and a few rush-lights were arranged around every grave save one, and that lay off in one corner, as if the sleeping clay had determined on isolation in death as well as in life.

"Will this grave be neglected?" asked Hester, who, in company with Rupert, stood in the twilight, close to the little mound, watching the slaves as they hurried noiselessly from sepulcher to sepulcher, lighting tapers and arranging wreaths.

"Lor' bless your soul an' body!" replied Bede, who was busiest of all; "no one ever touched *dat* grave—*dat* is, no libin' parson."

"No living person!" exclaimed Hester. "What do you mean by that, Bede?"

"Why, ye see a good many years ago old Mama Kidd, what's dead now, fixed up *dat* grabe mighty putey, wid roses an' posies, an' nex' mornin' dar wasn't none of dem dar. Gone clean, suh!"

"Gone! Who dared despoil the grave?" demanded Rupert.

"I'se nebber goin' to tell ye, kase I don't know. But uncle Peter says he saw a black ghost, *dat* looked just like Crazy Madge ober dar on Brooks' plantation, do it."

"Who is Madge?" asked Rupert, turning to Hester.

"An unfortunate creature who lives on the edge of the swamp over there, and is reputed crazy."

"And is she so?"

"I don't know; I never saw her but once, and that was when she saved me from drowning in the swamp, a good many years ago."

"How does she manage to live?"

"By selling charms and medicines to the slaves, and sometimes, I hear, she sends huge piles of herbs to the New Orleans markets."

"Where did she come from?"

"I don't know."

"Nor what induced her to settle here?"

"No."

Rupert looked down at the unadorned grave a moment in silence, and then he said:

"There is something remarkable about this Crazy Madge. She was not here in my time; neither was this grave, I'm quite sure of that, or I should have heard of it." Then, turning to Bede, he said: "Get a half-dozen tapers for this grave, and a wreath or two; and here, take this half-dollar."

"Dar's no use puttin' roses dar if *dat* ghost won't let 'em stay," remarked Bede, fondling the money as if it could not by any possibility be earned by him.

"Never mind the ghost; do what I tell you."

Bede did so, and a half-dozen hands were soon at work, and when Robert and Hester turned their steps toward Holcombe Hall, the lonely grave could be traced, even in the gloaming, by the lights that flickered about it.

CHAPTER V.

AMONG THE DEAD.

On the very verge of Dark Swamp, where the foliage grew rank, and where the land was oozy, stood the cabin of Crazy Madge. It was an odd-looking concern, triangular in shape, and with a slab roof which met at the top and

much the same as a Chinese pagoda does. It was constructed of rough-hewn logs, the chinks filled with clay, out of which creeping vines had sprung and run almost over the unique structure. There were two rooms—a kitchen and a bedroom—and both of these were furnished plainly, although comfortably, and everything was as neat and clean as the most fastidious housekeeper could desire.

All Hallow Eve created no stir in that lonely abode. Madge, a tall, graceful woman still, with piercing black eyes and heavy masses of purple-black hair, sprinkled here and there with gray, sat before the blazing log fire and looked dreamily into the red coals.

Presently the night-wind brought to her ears the solemn sound of bells, and she started quickly, as if a blow had been struck her, and exclaimed:

"Yes, yes! those are the bells in Rupert's tower! What does this mean? Can it be that *he* is dead?" she paused and bent her ear to listen.

Again the night wind swept by, and far above the noise of the rustling cottonwood she heard distinctly the pealing of the bells.

"Ah! I forgot!" she muttered now. "This is All Souls night, and old Gaspard's ridiculous injunction is being carried out."

She was about to seat herself again, when a sudden thought struck her, and, going to a closet at the foot of the bed, she took therefrom a cloak and hood, and donning these, strode out into the darkness.

The night was warm—almost sultry—the wind due east, and not a star visible, while the rush of the broad Mississippi could be heard for a mile on either side.

"A storm is brewing," muttered Madge, as she stalked onward like a phantom of blackness and despair. "The Mississippi never mutters so loud unless on the eve of a tempest."

On and on she trudged, now climbing over fallen trees, now sinking almost ankle-deep in the boggy land, and anon picking her way through a forest aisle where the shadows were so dark that it was almost an impossibility to find the path.

Finally she emerged from the wood and found herself within two hundred yards of the little grave-yard. The lights at the various graves were still burning—fluttering, spluttering and wasting—but the last watcher had left the tombs, to enjoy the *la vie* feast, and the scene was not only strangely weird, but very lonesome as well.

Madge took in the whole scene at a glance; then her lips parted and a groan of agony and rage escaped them, as her eyes fell upon the isolated grave which Bede had ornamented.

"This is his work again, is it? This is how he tricks the grave of poor Gertie's rival! He forgets that Madge is still alive, I suppose. But I'll show him; yes, I'll show him."

She vaulted over the low hedge; ran hastily to the grave, and furiously dashed out the lights and scattered the flowers in every direction. Then, for a moment, she gazed at the ruin she had worked, and catching up the cloak which had fallen from her shoulders, she sped off as fast as her feet could carry her in the direction of Holcombe Hall.

"I'll see him now—this very night," she muttered. "I'll see whether or not our compact can be thus easily broken. Oh, he'll find that I am not to be trifled with—not to be trifled with. No! no, not by him, at least!"

She stopped talking now. The rapidity of her motion took her breath, and there was not a breath of air stirring. The rain began to patter on the leaves, and make a murmurous sound on the river, and away to the south the distant thunder rolled sullenly.

At last Madge reached the Hall and glanced up at it. There was a spark of light in the tower, and a ray from a window on the first floor. With these exceptions the house was dark, and save the noise of the bell, silent too.

She seemed thoroughly familiar with the place, for, turning aside from the path in which she had been standing, she walked firmly to the window from which the light streamed, and placing her ear close to the sill, listened intently for a moment or two. She tried to see through the close-fitting blind, but in vain, and with a dash of impatience she sent it upward on its pulleys, and stepped into the room.

It was empty. The fire burnt low in the polished grate; the great astral lamp on the center-table cast a soft radiance on everything, including the marble bust of Psyche in the corner, and the French time-piece, all blue and gold, that shone upon the mantelpiece. The hands of the clock pointed to eleven.

"I do wonder where he can be?" said Madge, surveying her surroundings with a critical look. "Not in bed, for that bell would not be clanging and this lamp burning if he were."

She gathered her draggled skirts about her, and seated herself composedly in one of the easy-chairs by the table, and closed her eyes as if going to sleep.

Presently the bell stopped tolling; then there was an uneven footstep on the stair; the door opened, and Harold Holcombe stalked into the apartment.

He did not notice the presence of his visitor until he had sunk into a chair directly opposite to her.

With a half-suppressed shriek he leaped to his feet, exclaiming:

"You here, Margaret Moulton—you here?"

The woman arose very deliberately and eyed the cowering creature before her with something akin to triumph.

"Yes, I'm here," she replied. "Does it seem so strange that I should be here?"

He was recovering from the shock her sudden appearance gave him, and he managed to reply:

"No, no—that is, I was not expecting you."

"Indeed."

"Yes; you promised, if I should faithfully perform my duty to Hester, that you would ask nothing more from me."

"You promised to do more than that, Harold Holcombe; did you not?"

"I can't think of anything else," he said, desperately.

"Then perhaps I had better remind you," and Madge's hot breath came full in his face, "of a pledge you gave me, ten years ago this very night."

"A pledge?" he repeated.

"Yes, when I came to you after tearing the ornaments from her grave out there. You remember now. I see by that flash in your face that you do."

"Well, what now?" he demanded. "Have I not kept my faith with you?"

"Don't be a fool, man," she replied, fiercely, "and don't take me for one, or you may be sorry. I passed her grave to-night."

"Well?"

"It was decked off in flowers and ablaze with lights."

"I didn't do it!" he answered, his face becoming deathly pale.

She smiled derisively. "And do you expect me to believe you?"

"I do, when I swear it."

"You swore to be true to Gertie and you destroyed her! What faith can be put in such as you?"

"Be reasonable, Margaret," he said; "the past cannot be recalled; but I swear to you, by all my hopes for salvation, that I neither ornamented her grave nor ordered anyone else to do so."

She looked him straight in the eye as he spoke, but he quailed not.

"Then who did it?" she asked.

"As I have already said, I don't know."

"Was it the negroes?"

"I can't tell."

There was a momentary silence; then the woman said, "I do believe you; yes, Harold Holcombe, strange as it may sound to you, I believe you. But you must do this." She hesitated.

"Do what?" he asked, abjectly.

"Find out who dared to decorate the grave of that woman, for whom you deserted, yea, murdered poor Gertie."

"Hush-sh!" he exclaimed, tremblingly; "for God's sake, don't talk so loud."

"Do you promise?"

"Yes, anything."

She smiled—a bitter, scornful smile—and, walking to the window, pushed up the sash. She was about to step out, when she turned suddenly, as if she had just caught a fresh idea, and asked:

"When does Hester become the wife of your heir?"

"As soon as he arrives."

"And when do you expect him?"

"He may be here to-morrow; at furthest in two weeks."

"Good!"

That was all she said. The next moment she was out in the rain, which now fell heavily, and was fast quenching the few remaining tapers in the lone churchyard.

CHAPTER VI.

IN A STRANGE LAND.

THE ship *Merry Lass*, on which Tracy Cuthbert sailed out of the Mersey, was a stanch, fast vessel, and in four weeks from the day she dipped out of sight of Liverpool her anchor was dropped at the Balize.

Ten hours of wearily following the windings of the Mississippi, and then that oddest of American cities, New Orleans, was reached.

Tracy stood looking at the city from the quarter-deck. A fellow-passenger at his elbow

nudged him familiarly as the Merry Lass touched the levee at the foot of Girod street, and remarked:

"I say: what caused the city to sink below the river?"

"I can't say, I'm sure," replied Tracy.

"The blarsted place looks as if it was trying to crawl clean out of sight," ventured the other, and saying this he darted off to prevent a cabman from carrying away his baggage.

Tracy found, on inquiry, that the steamer Hazel Dell would leave at five o'clock for Vicksburg, and on this he engaged passage for Big Brier Bend, as the landing in front of Holcombe Hall was called.

Having four hours in which to wait, he occupied the time in roaming through the city. First he visited the old mint; then the French Market, where the population of the world is represented by the worst specimens of each type; and, finally, he sauntered down Esplanade street. The weather, notwithstanding the month was November, was very warm, and under the trees that line this beautiful thoroughfare, Tracy seated himself on a rustic seat, the ancient municipality had, in a munificent mood, placed there, and began to fan himself with the broad felt hat he had purchased in London.

He had not been long seated when a wrinkled old negress, dressed in a garb of many vivid colors, and whose head was surmounted with an odd-looking hat of black velvet, trimmed with yellow ribbons and a very bright and very big scarlet plume, hobbled up to him, and, depositing the basket she had been carrying on her arm at Tracy's feet, said, with an accent decidedly French:

"Monsieur is a stranger in de city—eh?"

Having no desire to converse with this exceedingly odd creature, he merely said, in answer: "Yes."

"Ah, I t'ot so much. You Anglaise man. Come to New Orlyans to-day on ship."

"Yes," with some surprise; "but how came you to know that?"

"Ah! my good friendt, queen Hortense know ebry sing in ze city. I see you get off ship."

"Indred!"

"But, my good friendt, Hortense know if she nebber seen ze ship. She know what you t'ink about now; she can tell what happen to-morrow as well as what happen to-day."

Tracy smiled incredulously, and remarked: "Then you are a fortune-teller!"

"Yes, zat what I am," straightening herself up and looking as important as possible. "Do you wish to hear your future?"

"No, not particularly; I'm quite willing to let the future develop itself."

"You don't believe me, monsieur. You zink me a imposture?"

"You're mistaken," answered Tracy, with a yawn; "I have not troubled myself to foot up an estimate of your character. I presume, however, that you claim by the use of cards to divine the future. Whether you can do so, truly, or whether your pretensions are only raised to gull the weak, is no matter of mine. So you will pardon my abri'ptness, when I say, as I do now, good-by."

He was about to turn away, when she clutched

him by the arm, and said, in a slightly changed voice:

"I am no juggler, Tracy Cuthbert!"

He started. "You know me?"

"Ay, well! I'm the Voodoo Queen; I know everything. You are just from England; you are going to Holcombe Hall to wed an heiress—a beautiful, pure, good girl; be true and kind to her, and God will be even to you."

She picked up her basket as she finished, and hurried down the street, disappearing among the crowd at the first corner, leaving Tracy half-stunned, and wholly lost in amazement.

His first impulse was to follow her, and force her to reveal to him from what source she had gained her information; but on second thought, he said:

"Perhaps she learned this from some of my fellow-passengers; and as to my marrying an heiress, that is such a palpable mistake, to call it by no ruder name, that it settles all doubts as to her true character—a mere charlatan—catchpenny."

He tried to dismiss the matter with this, but he could not refrain from dwelling upon the little episode long after the Hazel Dell had pushed out from the foot of Canal street; and it was not until the Red Church—twenty-five miles from the city—had been reached that he left the guards, and tried to sleep the miles away.

In the early gray of the following morning Tracy found himself on the shore in Big Brier Bend. He glanced around carelessly, and his eye alighted on a huddle of huts not far from where he stood. Dragging his trunk to the nearest, he rapped for admittance.

"Who's dar?" demanded a voice from the interior.

"'Tis I," replied Tracy.

"An' who, in de Lord's name, am you?"

"I'm Mr. Cuthbert, from England."

The door was opened now, and a large woolly head protruded. "How did ye git heah, honey?"

"I came up from New Orleans on the Hazel Dell."

"Yes, indeedy mi, oh! hi." Then a pause, "An' who did yer want ter see, boss?"

"Mr. Holcombe," answered Tracy, with some show of dignity in his voice; "is not this his estate?"

"No, sah, dis amn't his State. Lo'd bress yer soul an' body, no! Dis am de State of Louisiana. No, sah. I golly; Massa Holcombe rich, mighty rich, but dis State amn't no potato-patch, I kin tell ye, chile."

Tracy saw at once that his words had been misconstrued, so he hastened to add:

"I meant, does not this place belong to Mr. Holcombe?"

"Yes, sah!" with considerable emphasis; "all uv it; ebry bit, from de timber-land cl'ar back to de swamp."

"Where is the family residence?"

"You goin' up dah?"

"Yes."

"Den I'll show you wid de greatest uv pleas-ah."

The colored individual, who proved to be an old field-hand named 'Bijah—which was undoubtedly an abbreviation of the Biblical Abijah—ventured forth, now, and walked slowly,

and with a great deal of gravity, to an opening in the cottonwood, a few rods south of the cabin, from whence an uninterrupted view of Holcombe Hall could be had.

"Does you see dat big house up dah?" pointing with his index finger.

"Yes; distinctly."

"Dat am de place, honey. You can bet on old 'Bijah's wo'd eb'ry time. When he says dat is de place, he means it. Yes, sah, he does indeedy," with a great show of candor.

"Then you will be kind enough to look after my baggage. Good-morning!"

The young man, now out of all patience with his dusky informant, darted away across the fields and into the path that led up to the Hall.

CHAPTER VII.

FACE TO FACE.

WHEN Tracy reached Holcombe Hall he was conducted into the library by Bede, who said:

"Massa not up yet, sah; but I'se gwine to tell him you am heah. What's de name?"

"Tracy Cuthbert," replied the young man.

Bede rolled his big eyes up, and scanned the speaker from head to foot.

"So you am de gentleman dat massa's been expect'in eber so long?"

"Yes, I suppose so."

"Yes, indeedy! Well, well, well," and with an enigmatical shake of the head Bede disappeared.

In the ten minutes that followed, Tracy had an opportunity of glancing around the room. It was richly furnished, and bespoke taste as well as wealth.

While he was scanning the books in the heavy mahogany case, he heard a footfall in the hall, and turning around, he found himself face to face with Mr. Holcombe. The latter came forward eagerly, extending both his hands and exclaiming:

"Welcome! welcome, Tracy, my boy—welcome to the New World."

The tears started to Tracy Cuthbert's eyes at this cordial reception, and wringing the hand extended to him, he replied:

"My dear uncle, I thank you."

"Never mind the thanks. When did you arrive?"

Tracy told him; told him, too, of his trip across the ocean; of his first impressions of America, and was just about to inform him of his marriage, when a light footfall in the hall attracted the attention of Harold, and he said:

"That is your cousin, Hester. Stop a moment; she don't know you are here; I'll call her in." He walked to the door as he spoke, and Tracy heard him add: "Your cousin, Tracy, has arrived and wants to see you."

The next instant Hester, robed in a soft cashmere morning-wrapper, and looking fresh and lovely, entered the apartment and was formally introduced.

She felt very uneasy and awkward in the presence of the new-comer, whom she had been taught to regard as her future husband, and she was glad of the opportunity to escape from the room, which the breakfast-bell afforded.

Already she knew he was very handsome, and very respectful, but she feared it would be a

long time ere she could feel as easy in his society as she did now in that of Rupert Gaspard, who was all enthusiasm and fire. It is singular how fast a woman will discover that a man is cold and distant.

When Hester had left the room, Harold, dropping his voice to a whisper, said:

"She is just as good as she is beautiful, and Tracy, my boy, I have paved the way for you; there will be no difficulty about the matter at all."

Young Cuthbert looked at his uncle in surprise, and repeated:

"No difficulty?"

"Not the slightest. You are my heirs, and this affair would consolidate my wealth, as it were, and keep it in the family."

"But, I don't quite understand," put in the young man, his face coloring. "Do you mean to marry Miss Corwin to—"

"You, of course!"

"To me?"

"Yes, to you! Goodness knows you needn't look so frightened. She is an accomplished lady—young, beautiful—"

"But, my dear sir, this thing is impossible," and Tracy rose to his feet.

"Impossible!" gasped out Harold. "Impossible! You don't mean to say that you are in love with another?"

"Yes, sir," replied Tracy; "and not only in love with her—"

"There, there, you needn't go any further," interrupted the old man, his face a vivid scarlet; "this ridiculous, romantic English love must be put aside. Do you understand, sir? Must be put aside."

"But, sir," replied Tracy, "you are laboring under a great mistake; before I left England I married the rector of Digby's daughter."

It would be impossible to paint the fierce, almost wild expression that lit up Harold Holcombe's face as he turned in his rapid walk up and down the room, and faced Tracy. He tried to speak, but the words choked him; his lips, ashen now, moved, but no sound came forth; his hands worked nervously, as if they were eager to throttle the young Englishman, and the latter, thoroughly frightened, moved forward to catch the tottering old man in his arms.

"Back!" he hissed; "back! sir! Don't touch me. You ingrate! you fool!"

With these words a stream of blood dyed his lips and chin, and then he fell forward with a wild shriek that rung through the whole house. Tracy knelt down, and was about to lift Harold's head upon his knee when Toy entered.

"What have you done to him?" asked the latter, thrusting himself between Tracy and the prostrate form. "You must have said something terrible to drive him into this condition."

"I said nothing," answered Tracy, hurt to the quick, "but what I had a right to say—nay, what it was my bounden duty to say."

"And pray, sir, what was that?" without looking up.

"That I was married, and could not accept the hand he offered me."

Hester was standing in the doorway as he said this, deathly pale, and with hot tears in her eyes. She felt that she appeared in a false light.

and yet she had not the courage just then to place herself right.

Harold was recovering now, and Toy, with the assistance of Bede, carried him up to his chamber, where Rupert followed, leaving Tracy and Hester alone.

The former sunk down in a chair, and covered his face with his hands, and Hester was trying never so hard to go over and place herself right with him.

After a moment's hesitation, she walked over to where he sat, and, in a low, sympathetic voice, said:

"Mr. Cuthbert, permit me to say that I respect you for the course you have pursued in refusing to disguise facts, and believe me when I say that Mr. Holcombe's action is as repugnant to me as it could possibly be to you."

"Then you are Miss Corwin, of whom he spoke?" said Tracy, extending his hand, which was readily taken by the other.

"Yes, I am Hester Corwin. I am very—very sorry that we meet under such disagreeable circumstances, Mr. Cuthbert—very sorry, indeed."

The tears were dimming her eyes now, and the contour of Tracy's face was lost in misty rings.

"I feel sure of that," he replied, "and I can assure you, my dear young lady, that I regret this unpleasant affair, not only for the wrong it will do me, but for the pain it causes you. And now—good-by."

"You are not going?"

"Not going, Miss Corwin? Do you think me so dead to all sense of propriety that I could remain here, after what has taken place?"

"But, uncle Harold, as soon as the first gust of passion blows over, will repent his hasty words. Besides, you are a stranger in a strange land, and—"

"And financially, illy-provided for," put in Tracy; "but no matter. I have youth, ambition, health, and these, in a new country like this, can not be long in necessitous circumstances. I am certainly much obliged to you, Miss Corwin, for your kindness, and I hope at no distant day I will have a chance to reciprocate fully."

"But where do you intend going?"

"To New Orleans for the present."

"And not back to England?"

"No," with a slight hesitation, "I could not go back now, for—and I blush to confess it—I depended on receiving aid from my uncle on my arrival. This, of course, is now out of the question, and—"

Hester advanced a step, and said, with great eagerness: "I have a small sum, Mr. Cuthbert; if it would be of any use to you—"

He put up his hand as to waive the proffered succor, and replied:

"Pardon me, Miss Corwin. I'm deeply sensible of your kindness, but I cannot accept." He lifted her hand to his lips, and she felt hot tears drop upon it as he said: "Good-by! God bless you, Miss Corwin! Hester, farewell!"

She was about to speak when she felt herself rudely thrust aside, and Harold Holcombe, with wild, staring eyes, disheveled hair, and blood-stained garments, stood between her and Tracy, and pointed, imperiously, to the door.

"Go!" he cried, hoarsely, to Tracy. "Leave

my house; never cross my threshold again—as long as you live."

The young man never spoke a word—he could not have spoken had he so desired—he was too deeply wounded for words, and with ashen face and quivering lips, he passed out of the room, staggered along the hall, and finally found himself in the open air again, friendless, almost penniless, and in a strange land, too.

CHAPTER VIII.

A STRANGE STEP.

WHEN the door had closed upon Tracy, the old man, still trembling with half-suppressed passion, turned to Hester.

"So you join the league against me, too, do you? you whom I thought the very soul of gratitude—the very spirit of constancy—you whom I have nourished in my very heart to turn and sting me! Oh! this is too much for flesh and blood to stand, and I could almost find it in my heart to strangle you."

He advanced with outstretched arms, menacingly, while Hester, now terror-stricken at this violent exhibition, shrunk back to avoid his grasp, exclaiming:

"Oh, uncle Harold! don't! don't!"

What would have followed it is impossible to conjecture, had not Rupert Gaspard made his appearance on the scene, at this moment, and leaping to Hester's side, said, hotly:

"Mr. Holcombe, I am surprised at this conduct—this treatment of a delicate girl. It is unworthy of you, sir."

Harold's face showed at once that he was a trifle abashed at this; but he was not a man to be easily conquered, and so he replied:

"Senor Gaspard, you will pardon me if I remind you of the fact that this is my house; that my family troubles are not the common property of every person who chances to stop a night under my roof; and finally, sir, that I don't wish any interference from outside parties."

Rupert was stung to the quick, and his hot Spanish blood tingled in every vein; but, notwithstanding his anger, his judgment did not desert him, and bowing with mock politeness, he said:

"You are quite right; I had forgotten my character as guest; but, sir," and this he said with great emphasis, "I never forget that I am a man, and that it is the duty, as well as the privilege, of every man to protect a lady from insult or injury."

This was too much for Harold to bear, and, scarce knowing what he did, he again pointed to the door, and cried out: "Go, you too—go! go! go!"

Rupert clenched his fist and took a step toward Harold, but Hester caught his arm.

"For my sake," she whispered.

His hand dropped, and a soft light came into his face. "For your sake," he replied, and pressing her hand warmly, he left the apartment.

Toy, who had been a silent spectator of the scene, now came to the side of his master, and said: "Don't let this matter trouble you; it can all be explained to her!"

But Harold, who had sunk into a large stuffed chair, only moaned in response, and Hester

stole on tiptoe past the two men, and up to her chamber, where she cast herself down and cried out in her anguish:

"Oh! why have I been left alone in the world? Why have I no father, no mother, no friend?"

Then, after a fit of weeping, she knelt down and prayed to Heaven, and to that mother she had never seen, to guide her, and protect her in this trying, troublesome hour.

All day she remained there, sobbing, and trying to resolve to do something that would lift her from her present dependent state; but in vain.

When the gray twilight had taken possession of the Mississippi, and the shadows were deepening into night, Bede came to her, with a tray on which was temptingly displayed her supper.

"Who sent this, Bede?" she asked.

"Mamma Mima," replied Bede; "an' she wants ye to not cry dat way ye was a-doin' when she was up heah, dis aftahnoon."

Hester promised she would not cry any more, and after Bede had set down the tray and was about to retire, she asked: "Where is Mr. Gaspard?"

"Gone."

"Gone! Where?"

"Don't know. 'Bijah helped him wid his trunk down to de Bend, an' I s'pec' he's gone to New Orleans."

The girl said nothing further, and Bede, after standing at the door in silence for a moment, opened it quietly, and was off.

When Hester could hear the shambling gait of the African no longer, she sat down at the window and burst into tears again.

Now that she knew Rupert Gaspard had left Holcombe Hall, possibly never to return, she began to realize, more keenly than ever, how utterly lonely, how desperately wretched, how abjectly dependent, her whole life had been, and was. And she began to realize, too, that Rupert's short visit had brought her the only genuine pleasure she had ever experienced, and, although this came to her in a vague, indistinct way, it awoke a consciousness in her heart that he was not wholly indifferent to her; while his looks and words during that stormy scene in the library were, she thought, susceptible of a broad and gratifying construction.

The lights in the negro-quarters were twinkling through the ebon darkness when Hester arose, with the light of a fierce determination in her face; and, going to a set of drawers, she took from thence a well-filled purse, a heavy cloak, and a dainty bonnet.

Dressing herself hastily, she opened her chamber door and listened an instant. There was a perfect silence, the ticking of the great clock in the hall alone breaking the dead stillness.

Glancing back into the room which had been both her home and her prison, she said, in a voice that quivered with emotion:

"Good-by, old room; perhaps I shall never see you, nor you shall see me again."

Then she crept down the stairs, into the long, dark corridor. Here she paused to listen to Mima, who was crooning a plaintive air in the kitchen. Hester was tempted to rush in and kiss the old woman good-by, and she actually

started to do so, when the library door opened and Toy came out. She shrunk back, close to the wall, to escape observation, and kept as still as death until the servant disappeared in the dining-room. Then, thoroughly frightened, and fearful of discovery, she hurried along the hall, passed out of the great black hall door, and turned her steps in the direction of the river.

CHAPTER IX.

LEAVING HOME.

WHEN she had proceeded a short distance she turned around and surveyed, with one sweeping glance, the grim pile that had for so many years been her home, and for the first time, since that sudden resolve to leave it had entered her head, she trembled at the thought of going out from its protecting roof.

Onward she sped through the brambles, under the oaks and by the somber cypress, never pausing until 'Bijah's cabin was reached.

She glanced in through the open window and saw the old slave and his wife, Bett, sitting by the wood-fire, on which their supper was being cooked.

The old couple were talking about the relative merits of certain field "boys," and she heard Bett say:

"Nebber since de day I kum to de Ben' hab I seen cotton picked as it was down on Bayou Black. No, sahl!"

"Dat's pure down prej'dice," retorted the other party to the controversy; "an' I kin tell ye, Miss Bett, dat dar nebber was a niggah on Fortier's plantation could pick cotton or hoe cane wid dis chile in his youngah days. Dat's a suh pop!"

"Well," said the old woman, rising, "I s'pose you is right, 'Bijah, boy. It amn't fur me to dispise my own flesh an' blood. What dat?" she exclaimed, pausing in alarm, as she caught sight of Hester's white face at the window.

"What's what?" demanded 'Bijah, rising.

"Dar's a sperit at dat window. Oh, Lor' sabe us and bress us, bofe heart an' gizzard!"

Hester, seeing she could not evade the consequences of Bett's discovery, pushed open the rude cabin door and entered.

She had not yet crossed the threshold when 'Bijah, now thoroughly frightened, exclaimed: "Stop dar! Who am you; debbil or sperit, who am you?"

"Why, uncle 'Bijah, don't you know me—Hester?"

The negro's eyes stared at her for an instant, then a broad smile lit up the black face, and, forgetting his own trepidation, he turned to Bett, and said:

"Well, Bett, ole gal, aftah dat dar's no use in talkin'. Can't tell de little missah from a ghostess. I allers t'ink you know mo'h dan dat."

"But, was I lookin' foh her, say?"

"No, I spec' not; neider was I," returned 'Bijah, dusting a hickory chair with his coat-tail, and placing it before the fire for his visitor.

"No, uncle 'Bijah, I won't sit," said Hester. "I have come here to ask your assistance—your help."

"Ask de ole man to do anyt'ing you wish," was the ready reply; "he'll do it, suh."

"I want to go down the river," replied Hester, her voice a-tremble.

"Down de ribber?" exclaimed the old couple, in one breath. "Whar?"

"To New Orleans—and—and, maybe to New York or Havana. I hav'n't made up my mind which, yet. But, I'm going away from here to-night to somewhere."

"An' you don't tole me dat yer gwine 'way from Big Brier, do you?"

"Yes, from Big Brier Bend and Holcombe Hall, too."

"But, does de massa know?" asked Bett.

"No!"

"An' Lor' bress us, you amn't runnin' 'way is ye?" Bett's eyes were extremely large now, and her mouth wide open in wonder.

"Yes, I am!" replied Hester, desperately. "I can't live here any longer. Another year of this isolation, and cold prison-like life would kill me. I must go."

"Yes; but, missah, if 'Bijah helps you to git 'way an' de ole massah finds it out, he kill him, suh."

Hester had not thought of that before, but now she felt the force of Bett's rebuke keenly, and hastened to say:

"You are right, aunt Bett; it was very selfish, wickedly selfish in me to ask 'Bijah to endanger himself by aiding my flight; and now, if you both promise not to speak to anyone of my having been here, I'll go."

'Bijah stepped in between Hester and the door, and, after looking severely at Bett a moment, he said:

"Don't talk dat way 'bout me, ef you please, Missah Hestah. I'se on'y a poor, good-fur-not-ing niggah, whose best days habe bin done gone; but I'se still got a brave h'art, missah, an' I'll help you out of dis scrape if dey kill me for it."

There were warm tears of gratitude in the young girl's eyes as she said:

"Oh, 'Bijah, I don't want to get you into trouble—you have a wife, and—"

"Nebber min' de wife part," interrupted Bett, stirred into sympathy by her husband's brave words. "Ef de ole man t'inks it's right, an' he ought to do it, Bett ain't de gal to say no, nor t'row timba in his way."

'Bijah was proud of this speech, for he looked softly at his wife, and then, turning to the weeping girl, said:

"So you is goin' 'way from de ole plantation, is you?"

"Yes," with a sob.

"Nebber to kum back ag'in no mo'h?"

"I don't know, 'Bijah, I'm sure. Not for a long time, anyway."

"Well, Missah Hestah, ef you stays away a long while you'll nebber see ole 'Bijah ag'in. As de Good Book says, 'Deaf comes like a lion in de night and gobbles us up afore mornin'.' There was a pause, then he added: "Ole 'Bijah will miss his little missah, dat saved him from many's a scoldin' and once from de whip, berry, berry much, indeed."

There were tears in all their eyes, now, and not a word was spoken for fully five minutes; then 'Bijah, taking down a large lamp and lighting it, said:

"Stay heah, Missah Hestah, an' I'll go down an' build a fire on de bank."

"On the bank!" echoed Hester.

"Yes; de Eclipse will be down from Natchez in a few hours, an' ef dey don't see a light, dey won't land in de bend."

"But, may not the folks at the Hall see the fire and possibly come down to see who is going away?" asked the girl.

"Lor', no," was the reply. "Dey'll t'ink it's one of de Hargrabes' folks goin' somewhar. You know dey always goin' 'way."

This reasoning seemed cogent enough, and 'Bijah pushed open the cabin-door, hid the lantern under his great coat, and, hastily as his legs would carry him, made his way to the river.

Once behind the levee, he placed the light on the sand and proceeded to gather a quantity of dry drift; which done, he ignited it with the candle in his lantern, and then sat down to watch the wood blaze.

For an hour the good old negro sat there, nourishing the fire and straining his ear for the noise of an approaching steamer, and, at last, a boat, bound up-stream, crept along the opposite shore and disappeared around the point.

'Bijah was growing very tired, when he heard a shrill whistle from the boat which had just got fairly out of sight, and the next moment this was answered by another whistle, which sounded a great deal like a shriek.

"Dat's her; dat's the old packet!" he cried, jumping to his feet. "I'd know her toot any-whar."

He was right; it was the once celebrated steamer Eclipse, and she came dashing around the point, which was three miles off, with a rapidity that spoke well for her speed.

The old negro grasped his lantern and waved it over his head. Again it made the circuit, and then 'Bijah waited to see if his signal had been noticed. No, it had not, for it was evidently the intention of the pilot to keep out of the bend as much as possible by hugging the opposite shore.

"Dat tin fixin' ain't de ting, I 'pec', on such a dark night as dis one," muttered the old man, depositing it at his feet, and seizing a burning fagot, he waved it a half-dozen times as high in the air as he could reach.

This time the signal was observed, and, much to 'Bijah's gratification, the immense bell on the hurricane-deck of the approaching steamer rung out a clamorous peal, and then the two lights on the smoke-stacks wheeled around, and glared like the eyes of a fierce monster at him. He hurried off to notify Hester.

He found her ready, for she had been watching for him with feverish anxiety.

"Good-by, aunty Bett!" she exclaimed, wringing the hand of the old negress, who was sobbing as loud as Hester; "good-by, and I'll not forget you, be sure of that."

A few words of tender parting between the girl and 'Bijah; a blaze of a torch on the fore-castle of the Eclipse; the shoving out of a plank and the withdrawing of it again, and then Hester felt the boat throbbing beneath her, and could see her dusky friend standing by the expiring signal-fire, wiping his flooding eyes with the rim of his soft felt hat.

CHAPTER X.

DISHEARTENED.

WHEN Tracy Cuthbert had struggled back to New Orleans he found himself in the possession of a heavy heart and a light purse. His reception and disappointment at Holcombe Hall filled his once joyous, sanguine nature with gall, distrust and despair. He had not money enough with which to return to England, and portrait-painting, which had been his occupation in London, was a pursuit that required a wide range of acquaintances and a considerable capital ere it could be expected to yield much profit. Neither of these requisites being within Tracy's reach, there was nothing left for him to do but seek out some cheap way of reaching his native land again.

With this object in view, he sought the shipping. There were four vessels bound for different English ports lying close together, and, after a severe struggle with his pride, Tracy walked up the gang-plank onto the deck of the *St. George* of Glasgow, which was advertised to sail for Southampton in three days.

"Can I see the captain?" he asked, addressing one of the cabin-boys.

"I suppose," was the reply.

"Is he aboard now?"

"No," without looking up.

The tone was curt, and it stung Tracy to the quick, for it is a remarkable fact that an empty pocket makes a man terribly sensitive.

"Who was you looking for?" asked an old sailor, who had heard the conversation, and who now darted a savage glance at the boy.

"For the captain," answered Tracy.

"Well, he's gone up to the Custom House 'bout an hour ago, but, if you want to see him very bad, I'd advise you to sit down on this stool and wait a bit. He said he'd be back in an hour, and Captain Krandal is always on time, sir."

Tracy thanked the man kindly and took the proffered seat.

"You're an Englishman," said the sailor, "are you not?"

"Yes, sir."

"From what part?"

"London."

"Ah, indeed! I'm from Devonshire myself—from Spaybred. I suppose you've heard tell of Spaybred."

"Quite often!" exclaimed Tracy, eagerly, and rising; "'tis only seven miles south of Digby."

"Digby!" and the sailor grasped Tracy's hand. "Digby! And you know Digby?"

"Know it!" cried Tracy, wringing the hand of the seaman; "I have a wife there!"

The two men, forgetting that one wore broad-cloth and the other duck, laughed outright with joy, or something akin to it, and, in a few moments, were chatting away as familiarly as if they had known each other for years.

Tracy told Jack Atwell, for that was the sailor's name, the whole story of his trip across the Atlantic; of his disappointment and determination to return home again.

"Don't you think you acted hastily, my young friend?" said Atwell, when he had finished. "The old man spoke in his anger, and doubtless has cooled down ere this. Besides,

you are his heir; if he cuts you off, what do you propose doing with yourself?"

"He has cut me off, that is, made me understand that my marriage has completely alienated us; and now, I can't see that there is anything left for me to do, but to go back to London and my painting again."

"Back to London sounds queer to my ears, sir. I never like to hear folks, especially young, healthy folks such as you, talk of going back home with empty pockets. Don't you think there are a deal too many young men in England now?"

"Yes," replied Tracy, "I do think so."

"And so do I," said Atwell, reflectively, removing the quid of tobacco which he had been chewing from his mouth, and casting it into the river, where he saw it go to pieces before he added: "This is a young, fresh, healthful country, and this is the place for young, fresh, healthful men."

"You would advise me to stay here without a pound, would you?"

"Yes; better here in that condition than over there, where every road to fame and fortune is crowded. You can make a fortune here; over there you must inherit one."

Tracy was surprised at the logic of the seaman; and surprised, too, at the ease and fluency with which he talked. He was evidently a man with qualifications far above the demands of his calling, and the young Englishman felt that he could possibly do no better than take his advice, and, after a short pause, he told him so.

"That sounds like pluck and sense combined," said Atwell, "and these are first-class requisites, my young friend."

"But, my wife?" interrupted Tracy. "I can not stand a separation of years from her, and it will take years to accomplish any thing, you know."

"So it will," remarked the other, "but I was thinking you might send for her—that is, if she or you would not be afraid to let her make the voyage alone."

"Oh, certainly; I would be afraid, and she—she would not have the courage to attempt such a thing."

"You think so?"

"Indeed, I'm quite sure she would not. You see, Dora is but a child yet, in most respects, and never was further than London in her life."

"And yet," remarked Atwell, musingly, "female children have a wonderful vitality, and have a knack of blossoming into strong, powerful, enduring womanhood, whenever the occasion demands. Now, do you know that I believe your wife would not hesitate an instant to make the journey alone, with the sure prospect of meeting you on her arrival here?"

"Tracy shook his head in mild dissent. "I wish I could think so," he said; "it might induce me to remain here and try my chances with the rest."

Just then Captain Krandal was seen emerging through an alley-way made by piles of tiered cotton-bales, and Atwell, whose keen eye was continually roaming, singled him out at once.

"There comes the skipper," he said, nudging

Tracy, and as fine a gentleman as ever walked the queen's oak, I can tell you."

Captain Krandal was a tall, florid gentleman, of six and forty, with a full, frank blue eye, and a ruff of sandy whiskers framing in his face like a picture.

Tracy was favorably impressed at once, and when Jack Atwell introduced them, and Tracy had made known the object of his visit, the captain said:

"I will be glad to give you such accommodations as the St. George affords; we sail day after to-morrow for Southampton."

"And the fare, sir?" said Tracy fumbling the few pounds he had still left in his wallet.

"Will be merely nominal; there will be no trouble about that."

The young man thanked him, and half an hour after left the deck of the St. George with a lighter heart and more joyous spirit than he had known since the hour in which he left Holcombe Hall.

As he passed down Royal street from Canal, his eye was attracted by a large, imposing structure with fluted Corinthian columns, over the facade of which was hung a sign indicating the building to be that of the City Exchange.

While he was curiously surveying the pile, which the narrow street prevented him from obtaining a good look of, his eye fell upon a small tin sign to the right of the main entrance, which informed him that Theophilus Gammon was a portrait-painter, and that his studio was located on the third floor back.

"I will go and see Gammon," said Tracy, "and from him I can doubtless learn how painting pays here."

He found Mr. Gammon seated in front of his easel, with a huge pipe in his mouth, a palette in one hand and an opera-glass in the other, while behind his two very large and very red ears he held a pair of small brushes, as in a rack.

On the easel was the almost completed portrait of an old lady, if one were to judge by the face, and of a very stylish young one, were the dress only observed.

Mr. Gammon ignored the presence of Tracy for some considerable time, which he occupied in pulling lustily at his pipe, and glancing every now and then through the opera-glass at the old face and the youthful regalia.

At last, having apparently sated his appetite for the beautiful, he laid down the glass and turned a pair of weakish brown eyes on his visitor.

"Mr. Gammon, I believe," said Tracy, with a bow.

There was a pause; and after an instant's silence, Theophilus rearranged his opera-glass, and, with the greatest deliberation, leveled it at the head of the speaker, drawling out at length:

"Yes, yes, Mr. Gammon—Theophilus Gammon, at your service."

With an effort Tracy smothered a laugh, and added: "You are a portrait-painter, I believe."

"Yes sir. An American artist," was the reply.

"Ah! indeed?" responded Tracy. "I am an artist too—an English artist."

Tracy thought he could see Mr. Gammon's

very large and soiled nose turn up at this, but perhaps this was only a fancy, for the American artist rose to his feet now, disencumbered himself of all the appliances of his profession, and reaching out his hand, said:

"I'm glad to meet you, sir—very glad. How long have you been in this country?"

"Only a few days."

"A new-comer—eh?" Where do you propose locating?"

"I think of going back to England."

The little brown eyes made a great effort to stare at this, and Mr. Gammon remarked, with astonishment on every feature: "That sounds odd, sir—very odd—to hear of a man going back to the old country; of a man turning his back on so many golden opportunities, and that, too, in a few days after his arrival."

"But I came here on special business," put in Tracy; "and that being finished—"

"Oh, then you are not in search of employment?" interrupted Gammon.

A sudden resolve entered Tracy's heart, and he rejoined: "If I could find remunerative work, I wouldn't hesitate to try my luck here."

"Work! work!" exclaimed Gammon; "there's plenty of work and good prices. There's Goupil, who died last week of yellow fever, left a whole studio of uncompleted work behind. If you think of staying, you might get his room—the third door from mine on the gallery."

Yes, Tracy would stay—he determined on that now—and in less than an hour from the moment he entered Gammon's studio, he found himself with the key of Goupil's room in his pocket.

That same afternoon he visited the good ship St. George, and informed Atwell and Captain Krandal of his new step.

"By the time the St. George returns, I will either send for Dora, or go back myself."

Atwell congratulated him on his pluck, and the ill-assorted pair sauntered along the levee, talking of the old country and of those they loved, until night, damp and dark, closed in about them; then they separated.

CHAPTER XI.

THE PURSUIT.

HAROLD HOLCOMBE was seated in his big chair in the library at Holcombe Hall on the night of Hester's flight, moaning aloud in anguish of spirit. He had been informed of Tracy's departure and also of Rupert Gaspard's going, and he was now trying to think of some new move—some new plan to accomplish his purpose, when Toy entered with a wild, scared look upon his face, exclaiming:

"Oh, master! master! she's gone—gone clean away!"

"Gone! She!" exclaimed Harold, his eyes becoming fixed. "Where? Who?"

"Miss Hester, if you please, sir. I don't know where she's gone to, but Bede says she has not been in her room to-night."

"And you have ordered no search to be made? You have come here with your fingers in your mouth like a fool, to chat and chimmer like a woman!"

"But, sir—"

"I have no time to listen to words. Not an instant must be lost; she must be found. *Mu*

life depends upon it! Do you understand? my life!"

"Yes, sir, I understand," replied Toy, moving toward the door; "and I'll go and see if I can find her."

"See if you can?" echoed Harold. "There must be no seeing about it. She *must* be found! Go now, and awaken everybody on the place; leave no stone unturned—go."

Toy, seemingly glad to escape from the withering gaze of the old man, rushed out, and pale, ghastly, exhausted, Harold Holcombe sunk back in his chair, and covering his face with his wrinkled hands, muttered:

"She will be here demanding the fulfillment of my oath, and—and—what, what shall I say to her?"

His white lips parted and a groan escaped them, and, before it had died away, the window that opened out on the veranda was pushed violently back, and in its frame-work, like a weird painting of some old master who had a *penchant* for specters, stood the crouching form of Madge.

He glanced up; took in the whole picture at that glance, and shudderingly hid his face again.

For an instant Madge stood regarding him with a devilish malignity in her eyes; then she advanced to his side, and, tapping him on the shoulder, said:

"So you have tried to fool me at last, have you?"

Shudderingly he replied, lifting his hands as if in supplication as he spoke:

"No, Margaret, on my soul I swear that I have dealt honestly by you!"

"Tush! Tush! Don't attempt to hoodwink me with your lies. You can't do it. I know your tricks too well for that. You made a wreck of poor Gertie with your lies, and then you—"

"Don't!" exclaimed the old man; "don't speak, but hear me for a moment only. The boy came here from England, and when I told him of my plans he shattered them at one fell blow by telling me he was already married."

"What did you do?" Madge was searching his face.

"Do! What could I do? I drove him from the house as I would a dog."

"You did? and he was your nephew—your own flesh and blood, eh?"

"Yes; but I did it for the sake of Gertrude's child," he added. "Only for her sake."

The woman was silent, and a smile played about the corners of her mouth. "I had heard that you sent Tracy Cuthbert away, and that's what brought me here. Now, what do you propose to do for Hester?"

"Hester!" he repeated; "why, have you not heard?"

"Heard!" said the woman, with a great start. "Heard what? Have you murdered her, too?"

"For God's sake, be calm," he said. "You know how I loved Hester."

"Don't talk to me of your loving anybody," Madge replied impatiently. "You said you loved Gertie, did you not? Did you not swear to her that you idolized the very earth she walked upon? Did you not swear to be faithful unto death? and, after all, I know, and that riv-

er out there knows how you kept your vows. You see, Harold Holcombe, how well a sister can remember a sister's fate."

She was walking up and down the room now, clapping her burning palms together. Suddenly she paused and asked:

"What has befallen Hester?"

He did not answer.

"What has become of her?"

This time he replied, saying: "I can't tell, she left here this evening without telling anybody of her intention. I have ordered a vigorous search to be made for her, and I shall spare no pains to discover her whereabouts."

"You *must* find her," said Madge—"find her and bring her back, and since she cannot be your joint heiress, she shall be your sole heiress. Yes, every acre must be made over to her, and she must come into immediate possession. Do you agree to this?"

"I do," he said doggedly.

"Then swear it!"

"By all my hopes of heaven, I swear it."

"That's right, Harold," said Madge, in a sneering tone, "and now I will go and join in the search after Hester. If she be not found, prepare for your doom."

"But, Madge," he exclaimed, "be reasonable."

"I am not Reason," she answered, walking to the window. "I am Nemesis; a sister's blood cries to heaven for vengeance, and it is for you to say what form that vengeance shall assume. Good-night, Harold Holcombe—good-night!"

The window closed with a bang, and the old man leaped to his feet, and began pacing up and down the apartment.

"I have stood this long enough," he hissed. "I have been hunted down, driven like a hare before this she-hound, to mollify whom I have wasted years of my life. But, I'll do so no more. This crazy devil may do her worst; better death than to live under a cloud of fear as I do, dreading exposure and punishment, and not daring to fly from it, lest I should drive her from threats to action."

As he finished speaking, Toy came trooping along the hall, entering the room excited and heated.

"Well," demanded Harold, "any trace?"

"Yes, sir; she has gone down the river, on the Eclipse."

"How do you know this?"

"Why, sir, the boat had just rounded out into the stream when we got there, and, besides, 'Bijah, who assisted her off, told us so."

"Bijah?" cried the old man, his face growing purple. "'Bijah? How dare the black scoundrel do such a thing? Where is he?"

"In his cabin, sir," said Toy, meekly. "I told him you would settle with him and Bett in the morning."

"And so I shall. I'll make them an example to every nigger on the place. Toy, when does the next packet go down?"

He put this query calmly and awaited a reply.

"About noon to-morrow, sir."

"Not before?"

"No, sir. The Olive Branch is the next boat."

Harold pondered a while before he said: "We

go to New Orleans on the Olive Branch to-morrow, in search of Hester. Have every thing ready."

"Yes, sir."

"And, Toy, before breakfast send 'Bijah and Bett here."

"Yes, sir," and with this, Toy bowed himself out of the room.

CHAPTER XII.

UNDER A CLOUD.

WHEN the amber light of morning streamed along the eastern sky, touching the waters of the great Mississippi with bright gold and vivid scarlet, it lit up poor 'Bijah's humble home as well, and fell upon the bowed form of the old man and woman as, with arms locked tightly about each other, they rocked dismally to and fro.

They had not spoken for fully ten minutes, nor had they slept a wink during all the long hours of the previous night, for the words of Toy on his discovery of 'Bijah's connection with the flight of Hester, had filled them with a dread they could not put into words. And they sat, like two figures in ebony, waiting for sentence and apprehensive of the worst, for no one knew better than Harold Holcombe's slaves, how bitter were his resentments and how fearful were his punishments.

"De massa wants ye bofe, up at de Hall." It was Bede who spoke, standing in the doorway with a very sad face.

"Yes, Bede chile, you kin tell de massa we's a-goin' up right away," said 'Bijah, rising and going over for his hat which hung on a peg by the door.

Bede started off toward the Hall at a rapid rate, and Bett, her knees quaking with fear, tied a large bandana kerchief around her head, and took her husband's arm.

Had that old couple been on their way to a public gallows their faces could not have been more sad, nor could their whole aspect have spoken more eloquently of the utter despair, the desperate hopelessness that was in their hearts.

Harold Holcombe received them on the unkept lawn in front of the main entrance to the Hall.

Only Toy and Wilson, the overseer, were present, and these two stood apart as 'Bijah and Bett advanced.

"So I have been nursing vipers in my bosom, have I?" began Harold, his anger rising. "A nice pair indeed? What have you got to say for yourselves, eh?"

"On'y dis, Massa Holcombe, dat dis am our first offense, an' if you can forgibe us dis one time," said 'Bijah, "we'll try an' do bettah de next."

"Hush up! you confounded black rascal!" burst forth Harold. "I'll take good care this *shall* be your last offense. Forgive you, indeed! Do you know what I've got a great notion to do?" and he advanced with clinched fist menacingly. "I've got a great notion to tie you up heels and head and toss you both into that river there."

"De Lo'd habe marcy!" exclaimed Bett, unable longer to contain herself. "Don't do dat.

Massa Holcombe. We's bad an' wicked niggahs, but we amn't so bad as dat."

'Bijah put up his hand and motioned the old woman to be silent, saying himself, and with a solemnity that was not without its effect on Wilson and Toy—"Massa, I'se served you dis eighteen years; I'se always tried to do my bottom best, but I'se ready to be killed now if you am ready to take de sin of killin' me on your poor soul."

"No," replied Harold, with a devilish leer; "I'll do nothing so stupid. Your punishment shall not be over with a few pangs. No, you shall suffer for this trick during the remainder of your days. Do you hear me?—I'm going to sell you."

Bett's face brightened. Her master noticing this, was quick to add: "But you don't go together."

The light died out of the old woman's face and 'Bijah gasped:

"You don't mean dat, massa! Oh, please, Massa Holcombe, you don't mean dat?"

The tears were welling up into his eyes, and he stretched out his hands imploringly.

But this appeal might as well have been directed to one of the great red oaks that looked down upon them, for Harold Holcombe's heart was steeled against the poor wretches, and he seemed to revel in their misery, as he said:

"You, 'Bijah, go to Mr. Harris, in Alabama, who has been wanting to buy you for some time; and as for you," and he turned to Bett, "I'll have to keep you, I suppose, until I can find a customer for you. You can go now."

Notwithstanding the order, neither Bett nor 'Bijah moved. Indeed, they were so completely cast down at the prospect of their near separation that they were not aware of the fact that the unpleasant interview was at an end.

At last, when Wilson and Toy and Harold moved off, leaving them alone, Bett, unable longer to control her feelings, threw herself into the old man's arms, and burst into a violent storm of tears and sobbings.

He tried to quiet her at first—told her to be strong of heart—that God would deliver the good from the evil; but, finding himself unable to keep back his own tears while he spoke, he hid his face at length in his big wool hat and wept as if his poor old heart was breaking.

CHAPTER XIII.

IN THE STREETS.

WHEN Hester Corwin stepped off the staging of the Eclipse, at New Orleans, on the morning following her departure from Holcombe Hall, she began to realize the desperate nature of the step she had taken. The tumult of the bustling

While she was pondering on what course to pursue, and endeavoring to elbow her way out of the throng, a burly hackman approached, and said, in a familiar way: "Hotel, miss—any hotel or private house in the city?"

Yes, she did want to go to a hotel, or a boarding-house, or somewhere, but had no preference, stipulating only that it should be respectable.

"I know just the very place you want," replied the hackman—"a nice hotel on Gravier street, kept by a particular friend of mine."

"Is it a nice place—a real nice place?" asked Hester, hesitatingly.

"No nicer in the whole State of Louisiana. Come on, miss. Here's the cab. Jump in, please, and I'll take you to the St. Pierre in a jiffy."

She did as he requested, and then the driver mounted his perch, cracked his long whip, shouted to the crowd to make way for him, and the vehicle rattled over the rough planks and into Canal street.

A rapid drive of twenty minutes, and the hackman stopped before a large ugly building on Burgundy street. Dismounting and helping Hester to alight, he said: "This is the place."

She glanced up at the basket-like balcony that hung overhead, and which was filled with drying clothes; at the red muslin curtains that shrouded the lower windows, and then, turning to the hackman, she said:

"Oh, sir, I don't want to stay here. I don't like this place."

"I can't help that," he said, gruffly. "I haven't time to drive you all over town."

"But, sir," and she took out a well-filled pocket-book, "I will pay you for your trouble."

"Oh, then, that alters the case considerably," he remarked, eying the money; "you see, I'm a poor orphan, and I can't afford to lose my time, and I most always gets paid in advance."

Hester was afraid of the man; he was so coarse and brutal in appearance, and she thought it prudent to ask him how much money he wanted.

"Ten dollars."

"Ten dollars?" she echoed. "Why, I didn't think it would be so much as that."

"Some people are unreasonable," he added; "they have an idea that horses can be fed on paving-stones, and that men who drives cabs are paid by the city treasurer."

While he was indulging in this bit of sarcasm, Hester was selecting two five-dollar bills with which to pay him. One was ragged and much worn, and the girl asked:

"Will you take this one?"

"Yes," he exclaimed, "I'll take that, and more too!" and with this, he snatched the pocket-book out of her hand, and was about to leap on his box, when he was dealt a severe blow across the knuckles by a heavy walking-stick, which caused him not only to drop his prize, but to utter a loud cry of pain, and a man's voice close behind Hester said: "You can take that, too, while you are about it."

The girl turned quickly, and was face to face with Rupert Gaspard!

Scarcely knowing what she was doing Hester rushed into the outstretched arms as into a refuge, with tears of gratitude in her eyes at this opportune deliverance. He folded her to his bosom for an instant only, and then, turning to the hackman, who was now confronting him, he said:

"You had better move on, or I will have to turn you over to the police for attempting to rob this young lady."

"Let her pay me for the ride first," replied the Jehu, meekly. "I earned that."

"You have earned a great deal more, my fine fellow—a term at Baton Rouge—and you may

deem yourself exceedingly fortunate that you have fallen into such merciful hands."

"Then you don't intend to pay me?"

"Not a picayune," answered Rupert, returning to Hester her pocket-book, which he had picked up from the pavement. "And now, Miss Corwin, let us go," he added, extending his arm.

The young couple walked quickly away from the scene, while the hackman, muttering an oath, mounted his box and drove off in an opposite direction.

Of course Rupert was very much astonished at finding Hester in such a place, and when they had gone a square or two, he told her so frankly.

She was just as frank with him, relating every circumstance that had transpired at Holcombe Hall having any bearing upon the cause of her departure therefrom.

"And what do you propose doing?" he asked, when she had finished.

"Indeed, I don't know. I'm so discouraged that I've a great notion to return to my prison-house again. This big city really appears like a huge giant destined to crush every bit of hope, and youth, and even life, out of those who come to it unprotected."

A silence fell upon the twain, broken at last by Rupert saying in his quick, impetuous way, and with a great deal of earnestness:

"Miss Corwin, although the duration of our acquaintanceship does not entitle me, perhaps, to the name of your friend, yet, believe me when I say, as I do now, that I would gladly do anything in my power to serve you."

She thanked him with tears in her eyes, and he continued:

"Fate has enabled me to rescue you from the clutches of a scoundrel; will you permit me to supplement the kindness of fate, by providing you with a home during your stay in the city?"

"But, Mr. Gaspard, I've got money; I can go to a hotel," she interrupted.

"There is one serious objection to your going to a hotel," he said, "and that is this: your uncle Harold will, in all probability, visit New Orleans in quest of you, and, of course, he will naturally search the hotels first. Don't you think so?"

Yes, she thought so; but might he not find her out anywhere? "Besides," Hester added, "I must find employment; my money will not last long, you know."

"What do you propose doing?"

"Oh, dear me! I never thought about that," she replied. "But I can teach."

"What?"

"Music, or painting, or French; and I think, although I never tried, I could teach children to read and write, if I couldn't get any thing else to do."

"Those are brave words, Miss Hester," said Rupert, "and speak well for your courage; but, teaching in whatever branch, is a toilsome, ill-remunerated, vexatious pursuit, and I'm afraid you would soon break down under it."

"But I must do something," she said, determinedly. "And I can't do anything else."

"Then if you have chosen your calling al-

ready, and have quite made up your mind not to go back to Holcombe Hall, I will do all I can to assist you. As to where you will stop while in the city, I would suggest your coming to my aunt Montlea's, on St. Charles street. She will receive you kindly, I'm sure, and perhaps aid you in securing a position such as you desire."

Hester hesitated; she would much rather not intrude herself on the privacy of a family to whom she was an entire stranger, and so she said:

"I'm much obliged for your kindly offer, indeed; but I would rather go to a hotel until you have consulted your aunt, at least."

He consented to this, and Rupert, hailing a cab, they were soon deposited in front of the St. Charles Hotel—then a new structure.

They went in by a private door, and an obsequious servant showed Hester her room, at the threshold of which Rupert bade her adieu, promising to return in a few hours.

He was as good as his word—nay, better—for with him he brought Mrs. Montlea, his aunt, a dark, elderly lady, who, after a formal introduction to Hester, said:

"Dear Rupert has told me all, every thing; of your lonely life; of your treatment by your uncle, and of your brave flight. And now I have come to offer you a home until such time as you choose to seek another."

Hester tried to thank her, but the words would not come fast enough, and she cried instead—cried glad, tender tears, that brought a dimness into Jean Montlea's eyes as well, as she pressed the girl to her heart and whispered soothing words into her ear.

Hester Corwin felt happier than she had for many a day when she entered Mrs. Montlea's splendid mansion an hour after, and was welcomed to her new home by little Lotta Montlea, a child of eight years, and Mrs. Montlea's only one, her husband having died in the Indies six months before Lotta's birth.

"I'm so glad you've come," said Lotta, catching Hester's hand, "because we can play together, and sing in the evening, and you can sit in our pew on Sundays with mamma and cousin Rupert. Can't you?"

Yes, with a blush, as Rupert's name was mentioned: she could do all these things, and, what was more, would do all these things with the greatest pleasure, and so Hester Corwin began a new life.

CHAPTER XIV.

BYRON SKITTLES, ESQ.

THE lights of the Crescent City were glimmering through the fog and mist, and the darkness of night was settling over all, when Harold Holcombe, standing on the boiler deck of the steamer, thought he saw a familiar figure on the shore.

"That looks like Madge," he said. "But, how could she have arrived here in advance of me?"

As the boat neared the shore, the woman who had attracted Harold's attention moved off toward the foot of Natchez alley, at the mouth of which she stood until the old man had approached within a dozen yards of her.

Then, turning quickly, she plunged into the

gloom of the narrow alleyway, and although Harold called after her, she did not stop nor answer.

"That's that crazy she-devil, Madge," exclaimed Harold, "and I presume she is here on one of her witch's errands, or else she means mischief. If I could only get her to co-operate with me, we would soon find the girl; but, no, she won't do anything but rave about her dead sister, and threaten me. I guess I'll have to kill her yet, in self-defense."

He ground his teeth with rage as he spoke, and hurried up Natchez alley, past the old theater on Magazine street—which is now an auction room—and down Gravier to the St. Charles Hotel.

After registering his name and being shown to his room, he sat down and wrote an advertisement, offering a reward of one hundred dollars that would lead to the discovery of his niece, Hester Corwin, who, in the words of the advertisement, "had deserted her home, in the Parish of St. James, at the suggestion of a young man named Tracy Cuthbert, and was now in New Orleans."

This done, he dispatched one of his servants to the *Picayune* office with it, and being too nervous to sit longer in the quiet room, he donned his hat and spent the next hour in walking aimlessly about the damp streets, scanning the faces of every passer-by, and finally bringing up in Lafayette Square, where he seated himself on one of the rustic benches and gave way to bitter reflections.

He was interrupted in this by a small, wiry, peak-nosed individual, with a large hat and an immense umbrella, who, tapping Harold on the shoulder, said, familiarly:

"Good-evening, sir. Have I the pleasure of addressing Mr. Harold Holcombe, of St. James Parish?"

Shaking off the hand which still rested on his shoulder, the latter said, rising as he spoke: "I am that gentleman."

"Ah! So I thought," replied the little man. "I'm not mistaken; no, sir, rarely, very rarely."

"But may I ask, what is—"

"Oh, certainly," interrupted the stranger; "you may ask what you please; no one could attempt to do so foolish a thing as to prevent a man from asking as many questions as he, in his wisdom, may see fit; but I would, at the same time, call your attention to another fact, and that is, that there is no power to compel me to answer only such queries as I deem proper."

Harold was becoming hot and excited now, and turning on the little man, he said: "You talk like a fool, sir."

Not in the least disconcerted, the other replied: "Don't you act like one. As for me, I can afford to talk; it is my business, but, discretion is what you want, my dear sir—discretion."

"Do you know who you are talking to?" demanded Harold, now beside himself with rage.

"Perfectly; I am addressing Mr. Holcombe, proprietor of Holcombe Hall, and, if my client knows what she is talking about, and I haven't the slightest doubt but what she does—I have the pleasure of addressing the gentleman who, on a dark night, seventeen years ago, cast a woman named Gertrude Moulton off the steamer *Argyll* in Cypress Bend."

Harold felt himself growing weak and faintish, and clutching the little man's arm, said:

"Who told you this—this lie?"

"Oh, now, my friend, don't go on that dodge, because it is an old one, and won't pay, in this instance," replied the small man, looking calmly up into the colorless face before him. "You see, to be frank with you, I'm an attorney, Byron Skittles, of No. 32 Natchez alley; and I have a certain client, by name Margaret Moulton, who has the liveliest disposition in the world to hang you; or lock you up for the remainder of your life in State prison."

"But," interrupted Harold, tremblingly, "the woman is crazy."

"Sane enough, I fear, to convince a jury."

"But she can't pay you for your trouble, Mr.—"

"Skittles—Byron Skittles, sir."

"Mr. Skittles, I can make it worth your while to work for my interest instead."

"Ah! now you talk business," replied the little attorney, grasping the cold, sweaty hand of Harold. "I am always for sale professionally—always for sale to the highest and best bidder. How much do you say now?"

"Five hundred dollars," whispered the old man; "five hundred in gold."

"Very good, Mr. Holcombe—very good to start on; but hardly the figure yet. You see I'm doing you a great service; am really doing an unprofessional and undignified act, and only a large fee could induce me to act unprofessionally."

"Well," said Harold, discovering that his secret was in the hands of a man who would not scruple at any thing, and whom he would have to win over to his interests at whatever cost, "you must remember, sir, I am not a rich man, by any means, but I will endeavor to compensate you for your kindness in this matter. What do you say to a thousand dollars?"

"I would say to a thousand dollars," remarked Mr. Skittles, grasping Holcombe's hand again, "that it might be worse. But when do I get the money?"

Harold was growing fierce under this impertinent assault, and he answered:

"You shall have the sum I promised you to-morrow or next day."

"Better say to-morrow," replied Skittles, shrugging his shoulders. "I want to see the money."

"Then to-morrow be it. I shall call at your office between three and four."

"Good."

The little man bowed as he said this, and was turning away, when a sudden thought occurred to Harold, and catching the lawyer's coat-tail, he asked:

"But suppose I purchase you, may she not employ some one else, and bring matters to a crisis?"

The lawyer paused a moment, looked up at the tall tree before him, then down at the wet grass, then pursed up his lips as if he was about to whistle, and finally said: "I will humor her by pretending to be eager to hasten the suit, and attribute all the delays to legal technicalities, and if she becomes too determined, I'll try to effect a compromise, eh?"

"I have been living on a compromise all my life, and I'm getting tired of it."

"Then if she won't come to terms, you can," and here he lowered his voice to a hoarse whisper, "try something more quieting—something that will keep her *very still*."

Harold Holcombe glanced sharply into the little elfish face, which had an ugly light in it now, and, pleased with what he saw there, he pressed the dwarf's hand and said: "I'll call to see you to-morrow. Good-night."

"Good-night," replied the other, and rambled away.

CHAPTER XV.

LAWYER AND CLIENT.

ON the following morning Byron Skittles, Esq.,

was seated in his office, looking over some legal documents, a pair of glasses on his large nose, and his big feet planted on the top of a small black table.

He had scanned over the papers, reassorted them, and was about to rise when a tap at the door caused him to take off his glasses, and put down his feet, as he said:

"Come in."

The door opened, and Madge, dressed up in her many-colored costume, entered.

At first Mr. Skittles's weak vision did not penetrate her disguise, and he said, crisply:

"Go about your business, ma'am: we don't want any Voodooing or fortune-telling here."

"Don't you know me better than that?" replied Madge, advancing, and looking him in the face.

"Why, goodness me!" and he put on his glasses and took a long stare at the odd-looking creature before him. "I've seen you often on the streets; and so you are Margaret Moulton, *alias* the Voodoo Queen of the First Municipality?"

"Yes," she answered, placing a basket of herbs upon the table; "I use this guise to protect myself from insult, and to work out a living as well."

"Quite original. Upon my conscience, I wouldn't have known a bit of you. But, my dear madam, you can do better than sell herbs; you can make *him* support you. Why don't you do it? Money is better—that is, it will go a great deal further—than revenge, and be altogether more satisfactory."

The woman's face was burning red underneath the yellow stain, as she replied: "I wouldn't touch a cent of his money; it would appear to me like Gertie's blood-money; and, besides, I want ample satisfaction."

"But, would not money satisfy you? I don't mean a miserable stipend, but a good round sum."

"No!" impatiently. "I don't want money."

"You had better think again," he said, astonished at her vindictiveness.

She looked sharply, suspiciously into his face, as she said: "Why do you wish to settle this matter in this way?"

The question was unexpected, and it brought the blood to the little ugly face, but Skittles managed to call up a sickly smile, and answer:

"For no other reason, ma'am, than to benefit you. Possibly there is not another attorney at the New Orleans bar that would advise you to do this, for the very reason that your acceptance of it would take money out of my own pocket. Now that seems strange to you, doubtless, but my heart is human, not professional. I have tried to be sordid and selfish like other men, but I can't; no, struggle as I will, I can't."

He seemed very sorry that his heart was made of such tender stuff, but the woman was not to be deceived by this cheap display of grief, and, lifting her basket, she said, curtly: "So your heart is too soft, eh? Well, sir, there are others who will be glad to attend to my business for me."

She was about to say "good-morning," when Mr. Skittles bounded out of his seat as if he was composed, in a great measure, of India rubber, and laying his hand coaxingly upon her arm, said:

"You jump at conclusions altogether too readily when you think that I would not prosecute your suit, my dear madam. I'm well aware of the fact that you can obtain any amount of advice, yes, madam, any amount, but—" and here he paused and looked at her with an assumed benevolence of expression that in any other instance might have been irresistible, but in the present case was wholly lost on Madge, who simply said, in a frigid way:

"Well, Mr. Skittles?"

"Well, ma'am as I was going to remark, you will find few gentlemen in legal circles who will step out of the beaten path of professional labors, as I have done, to advise you to settle on a money basis."

"But I don't want money," snapped Madge, impatiently.

"I understand that now," he answered. "If you say *shore* matters, I'll push him against the wall in a twinkling."

"That's what I want done," replied Madge. "When will you begin?"

"Sit down," he said, pointing to a chair and sinking into one himself. "Now, the first thing is, what do we intend to prove? Please run over the main facts, as you did last night, and I'll jot them down."

"Don't you remember what I told you only last evening?"

"Oh, yes, very well; that is, I've a general idea of the case, but I want the dates and details, you know. Nothing hits a jury as hard in a case like this as dates."

He picked up his pen and waited for her to begin.

Madge looked down upon the floor a while; then into the wee, expectant face in front of her, and after passing her hand over her forehead a number of times, she said, in a slow, hesitating way:

"Well, the beginning was Harold Holcombe's coming to our home in Huntsville, Alabama."

"That was when?" interrupted Skittles.

"That was in July, 1837, I think."

"Very good; July, '37," he put down the date.

"He remained there all that summer and winter, and in March of the following year he married my sister, Gertrude Moulton."

"March, 1838," repeated the lawyer, as his pen flew over the paper. "Well, what followed the marriage?"

"After a few months the young Englishman grew tired of his American bride, and one night he disappeared. Gertie was wild with grief, and we thought for awhile she was going to lose her wits. After Gertrude's child was born—that is the girl what they call Hester Corwin—my sister said to me, 'Margaret,' said she, 'I'm going to hunt for Harold, and I want you to look after my poor baby. Be a mother to it, if I never come back;' and then she went away in the night, without a single soul knowing anything about it."

"Went off in the night," repeated the lawyer.

"Yes, went off, and six weeks after she met him on the steamer Magnolia, at Memphis. They met on the guards, after supper, and on her recognizing him they had some words, when he lifted her up and threw her overboard—yes, sir! and our poor Gertie has never been heard of since!"

"Who witnessed this?" put in the lawyer.

"The watch of the boat and two passengers!"

"And why was not Holcombe arrested on the spot?"

"He would have been, sir, but he leaped into the river at once, and everybody thought he was drowned. I thought so myself for five years; then I found him out. He was a widower for a second time then."

"Good!" ejaculated the attorney; "this is as good as a romance. Well?"

"I took his child, Hester, to him and made him swear to give her everything he possessed, both in England and America, on condition that I should not hang him."

"Yes, and he did not keep his oath, eh?"

"His English heir, whom he intended to marry Hester to, married another, and Harold drove Gertie's child out into the world."

"Very foolish proceeding on his part," remarked Skittles. "But where are your witnesses now—the mate and the two passengers?"

"The passengers I know nothing about; the mate, Jacob Pendlip, lives at Paducah, Kentucky—or, at least, did live there four years ago."

"And where is your sister Gertrude's marriage-certificate?"

"I have got the certificate all right. But, now, when will you have him arrested?"

"Well, it will take some time to go up there and have all the papers made out, you see."

"No need to go up there," she said; "he is in the city at this very moment."

"Indeed! Where?"

"At the St. Charles Hotel."

"That's a good thing; I'm glad of that. To-night we'll arrest him."

"Why not to-day?"

"It will take all day to make out the papers, my dear madam, and only the utmost expedition will get them ready in time to take action this evening. But I'll do my best—my very best."

She thanked him in her quick, blunt manner, and, after promising to call again in the morning, left.

When her footsteps could be no longer heard, the little attorney rubbed his hands, and muttered:

"A sharp customer, but not a match for Skittles by a long shot. No, sir-ee! Mr. Holcombe must leave town to-day, and that will give us a chance to get rid of the woman in some way. One person is quite enough to have possession of such a precious secret—quite enough."

He put on his hat, made a circuitous journey to the St. Charles Hotel, and informed Harold that Madge would not compromise.

"Then she must be otherwise dealt with," said Harold.

The lawyer closed one eye, and said:

"Quite right—in some *other way!*"

They understood each other.

CHAPTER XVI.

PARTING.

ON the third day after 'Bijah had incurred his master's displeasure, he was seated in front of his cabin mending a fishing-rod, with Bett by his side, and wondering if Harold really meant to carry out his threat of sending him to Alabama.

He was left long in suspense, for presently Wilson, the overseer, was seen approaching from the direction of the Hall. He came with rapid strides, and ere either of the old couple had time to conjecture the nature of his visit, he said:

"'Bijah, Mr. Harris has sent his man after you."

"Aftah me?" echoed the old slave, his heart sinking within him. "An' do dey really mean to take me 'way, Mr. Wilson? Do dey really mean to take me 'way?"

"Yes," was the unfeeling reply; "get ready at once."

"No, no, not now," gasped poor old Bett, flinging her arms about her husband's neck and straining him to her bosom. "Oh, Massa Wilson, ef you take 'Bijah 'way dis chile will die—die suah!"

"Take h'art, Bett, gal," whispered 'Bijah, pressing his hand caressingly on her head: "de Lord will comfort you in yer loneliness, an' mebbe will hab de goodness to call us bofe up dar soon, whar dar will be no sellin' 'way to Alabama, or any oder place."

"I can't let you go!" screamed Bett, clinging closer and closer; "it's like pullin' out de h'art out ov one's body."

"But mebbe ole massa will take me back," said 'Bijah, endeavoring to soothe Bett, "an' we'll die to-geder yet."

"No, no!" cried the old woman; "you will nebbber see Big Brier Bend again, and we separate now for-eber and eber. Oh, I can't stan' it, I can't stan' it! 'Bijah, boy, good-by."

She tore herself away and rushed frantically into the cabin, and Wilson took this opportunity to touch the old slave upon the shoulder, and say:

"Come now, before she comes out again."

"Yes, sah," replied 'Bijah, walking to the open window. Looking in, he saw Bett stretched upon the floor sobbing and moaning, which moved him so that he said: "Jest let me say good-by once again, Massa Wilson, please."

"No, no; come on!" was the reply; "we're losing time."

'Bijah looked at him reproachfully.

"But, Massa Wilson, I'm gwine away from dis place: in an hour or two you won't be troubled wid dis ole man any more; an' I only axes five minutes,

It's pretty hard, Massa Wilson, to habe to lebe all you like, all you lub, an' go into banishment, an' neber see any ob dese t'ings ag'in."

It did strike even Wilson as a hard lot, and he said, somewhat kindly:

"Go on, then, and say good-by. Mr. Harris is waiting up at the house for us."

'Bijah promised to be expeditious, and disappeared. He came out directly, holding Bett's hand, and Wilson noticed that the tears were silently coursing down the cheeks of both.

The old woman leaned against the door-post and said:

"Good-by, 'Bijah; you's bin a good man to me, an' now we's partin' foreber, I'll pray de Lo'd you be happy down in Alabama as yo hev bin heah at de ole Bend; an' I kin tell you 'twill be a mighty lonesome place widout you."

She began to cry harder than ever, and 'Bijah muttered, in a broken voice:

"Good-by, Bett, gal, an' I'll meet you dah some day!"

He pointed to the sky, now golden in the sunset, and hurried after Wilson. Turning around, when he had put a hundred yards between him and his former home, he saw Bett lying across the threshold, and he knew that she had fainted.

"God A'mighty help dat poor, lonely ole woman!" he said, and burst into tears again.

That night 'Bijah, from the deck of the steamer Princess, saw the lights of Holcombe Hall twinkle into gloom and nothingness, and he then realized more keenly than ever that he was the property of the man who had stood quietly by his side, wholly oblivious of the pain that was gnawing at the poor slave's heart. He felt, too, that he was paying a terrible penalty for one indiscretion.

CHAPTER XVII.

A NEW PLOT.

HAROLD HOLCOMBE arrived home the morning after 'Bijah's departure, disappointed, miserable, and badly scared, too. He had relinquished his search after Hester, and fled from New Orleans, lest Madge should take it into her head to have him apprehended for Gertrude Moulton's murder.

He had given Byron Skittles one hundred dollars as a retaining fee to bind him to his interests, and the little attorney had promised to clip the claws of the Voodoo queen, and make her perfectly harmless; or, failing in this, he was pledged to give Harold timely warning to quit the country, and thus escape the gallows.

This last, however, was a *dernier resorte*, and was not to be thought of as long as any other expedient remained untried.

During the night, the door-bell at Holcombe Hall was rung with great violence, and Toy brought the intelligence to Harold, who stood pale and excited in the center of the library, that a gentleman named Skittles from the city wished to see the master.

"Skittles?" repeated Harold. "Tell him to come in."

Toy did so, and Byron Skittles, with his huge umbrella still under his arm, stalked into the apartment, in the center of which he stood for a moment, looking curiously about him.

"Good-evening, Mr. Holcombe," he said, at length, approaching Harold, hat in hand. "Comfortable quarters here, very comfortable upon my word. Better than I expected. I see you understand what good living is and—"

"Where did you come from?" interrupted Holcombe, out of all patience.

"New Orleans," coolly replied Skittles, dropping into a chair, and making room for his hat on the table beside him.

"When did you leave there?"

"At five o'clock this evening."

"Well, go on; what brought you here?"

"Can't you guess?"

"No, sir; I can't guess. I've no time for guessing. Go on; don't you see I'm all impatience?"

Skittles lifted his heavy brows and looked his questioner calmly in the face. "I see," he said. "I came up with Madge."

"With Madge?" ejaculated Harold, starting up.

"Yes, with Madge," replied the lawyer; "but there is no cause for alarm."

"Where is she now?"

"Gone to her cabin. I promised to sleep in the cotton-shed, and so got rid of her."

"What does she propose doing? What brought her back so suddenly?"

"I told her it was necessary to come up here and have the case tried in St. James Parish. To-morrow I'm to have you arrested."

"Me?" exclaimed Harold.

"Now, don't get excited," said the little man; "nothing so ill becomes a man of sense as excitement; besides, as I said before, I have provided for your safety."

"How—in what manner?"

"Will you be calm? I can't talk business unless you act like a sane man."

With an effort, Holcombe managed to drop into his seat and hold his breath while Skittles proceeded to say that there was nothing to be gained by dealing tenderly with Madge.

"I'm aware of that," replied Harold, "and I'm tired of it, too."

"Well, then, tell me," said the wee lawyer, "have you a room in this house, or on this place, that could be converted into a prison on short notice?"

"Yes."

"Where is it?"

"In the tower."

"Is it a secure room?"

"Very."

"Any windows?"

"No; only two small apertures, and these are grated. Pray tell me what you purpose doing?"

"Can't you guess?"

"No!" bluntly.

"Then I'll tell you. I propose making Miss Madge a prisoner, and that room up in the tower her prison. Once there, you can sleep peacefully, and she will fare better than she does now. Poor thing; it will be a good change for her."

The plan met Harold's approval at once, and he couldn't help wondering how it was that he had never thought of this expedient before.

"But when do we secure her?" he asked.

"To-night," the little man said.

"Why to-night?"

"Because, if you don't arrest her to-night, she will have you jailed to-morrow."

"Enough," replied Harold. "How many will it take?"

"How many what—men?"

"Yes."

"You and I can do it. No one else need know of the affair. It will be more safe."

"I see," said Harold; "but Toy—my man Toy—knows everything, and hence there is no reason why we should attempt to keep him in the dark as to this matter. He will be her jailer you know."

Holcombe touched a bell-cord at his elbow; afar off a musical bell tinkled softly, and the next instant Toy stood bowing in the doorway.

"Come in, Toy," said Harold. "We have something to communicate to you."

The man advanced, and his master added:

"This is Mr. Skittles, from the city—a friend of mine, who has kindly volunteered to help me to escape the snare set for me by that infernal vixen, Madge."

Toy said: "Ah! indeed?" and looked shyly at the lawyer, who, in turn, looked hard at him, as he said: "Mr. Toy, I have placed the greatest confidence in your discretion, and I trust that, in our future intercourse, nothing will occur calculated to mar that confidence in the slightest, or impair the

good opinion your frank, honest face created on my first seeing you."

Toy bowed almost to the floor, and said: "I hope not."

"And now to business," continued Skittles, addressing himself to Toy; "you are familiar with this woman's premises, are you not?"

"Yes, sir; I know where she lives."

"Ah!" with great solemnity, "you know where she lives. Good! You will, I presume, under the direction of Mr. Holcombe here, conduct us to her abode?"

"Yes, sir, with pleasure."

"And assist us in making her a prisoner?"

"Yes, sir."

"And aid us in conveying her to the dark room up there in the tower?"

"I will."

Harold was about to make an observation, but Skittles, with the greatest importance in the world, waved him into silence, merely remarking, by way of explanation: "I believe your case is in my hands; if so, permit me to conduct it after my own ideas." Then, turning to Toy, he said: "Now get your hat, my man, and we'll be ready in a jiffy."

Ten minutes later the three men stole noiselessly out of the side entrance to the Hall, and turned their steps toward Dark Swamp.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE PRISONER OF THE TOWER.

MADGE MOULTON was seated in front of a blazing fire of pine logs, that hissed and stewed, and steamed and crackled, and the crimson glow of which lit up her features with a glare that added not a little to the weird and uncanny appearance of the woman.

"I ought not to have consented to having the girl called his niece when she was his own child," he muttered. "Her name is Hester Holcombe, not Corwin, and she should have had her real name had I been as keen and shrewd as he has proved himself to be."

She rubbed her hands together in the old fierce fashion, as if she would cleanse them of all complicity in the wrong she complained of.

While thus engaged the door was pushed open, and the large hat of Byron Skittles was thrust into sight.

Madge was upon her feet in an instant.

"What do you want now?" she asked recognizing the attorney at the first glance.

"Pardon me for this rather unseasonable interview," he replied, stepping in and approaching Madge; "but I wanted to ask you a few questions relative to this Holcombe matter."

"Well, go on," said Madge, pushing him a chair, and seating herself.

"I came to inquire if you had any *positive* proof that your sister died by the hand of Holcombe."

He was shifting closer and closer to her.

"Proof! What more proof do you want than I've already—"

She did not finish the sentence, for Skittles, with a rapidity we would not have been ready to give him credit for, thrust a gag, in the shape of a large handkerchief, in her mouth, and, at the same time, pinned her arms tightly behind her.

She made a desperate effort to free herself, and would doubtless have succeeded in doing so, had not Toy and Holcombe rushed in, and, with the aid of a rope, tied her hands and feet.

It would be utterly impossible to describe the look that came into the woman's eyes as she recognized Holcombe, and saw, too, that he was merely a confederate of the monkey-like lawyer, who had duped her so cruelly.

She strained the thongs that bound her, but without avail, and Toy and Skittles lifted her to her feet, which they now unbound, and Toy said:

"Walk now. Put your feet under you."

"Yes, you may as well take matters coolly,"

added Skittles; "we don't intend you any bodily harm. You shall be better taken care of where you are going than where you are now."

She stood erect, and flashed her eyes at Holcombe, who, like a guilty coward, kept in the background, and maintained an utter silence.

It was a long way back to the Hall, and Dark Swamp was never more dismal than on this occasion.

Finally Holcombe Hall was reached, and Madge conveyed to the room in the tower that had been selected for her prison. Here the gag was taken out of her mouth by Toy, the others having retired to the lower part of the house, and the woman began to understand the object of her arrest and her probable fate. This did not prevent her from demanding:

"Why was I brought here?"

"For safe keeping, I believe," was the meek reply.

"But I'm no criminal to be locked up in this fashion."

"No one said you was," said Toy, "but people with long tongues are dangerous, and it's better to have you here than master in jail."

"But your master is a murderer," exclaimed the woman, "and I know it."

"If you hadn't knowed it so well you mightn't have been here," said Toy, slamming the door, and locking it firmly on the outside.

Madge listened to his retreating footsteps until they died out into silence, and then she made a rush with all her force against the heavy door. The bolts rattled in their sockets; the chain on the outside clanked, a night-bird flew screaming by an orifice in the wall, and that was all.

The deep darkness; the cold wall; the thought that this was to be her abode until death came, drove the poor creature, long verging upon actual insanity, into its dread confines, and uttering one prolonged shriek, that echoed fearfully throughout that old pile, she fell prone upon the floor, senseless—almost lifeless. The next morning found her a staring, pitiable maniac.

CHAPTER XIX.

LOST AT SEA.

MONTHS flew by, and Tracy Cuthbert found plenty of work and tolerably good pay too; and from the Slough of Despond he had emerged at last, as Jack Atwell predicted he would, inspired with renewed confidence in his own ability to make his way in the world without the assistance of his uncle Harold or anybody else.

He had not attained this, however, without a desperate and persistent struggle—a struggle such as at one period of his life he would have considered himself incapable of waging under any circumstances.

But the thought of his little wife, Dora, nerved him in the dark hours of doubt, and the hope of seeing her soon gave him fresh courage to go forward.

On a scorching July day he paid the good captain of the Argyll Dora's passage-money, and now—it being September—he was anxiously awaiting her arrival.

As the time approached when the underwriters assured him the vessel would arrive, he could not remain in his studio at all, and, instead of painting, he haunted the landing all day, only to go back at night to his lodgings in Dryades street, disappointed and tired.

Thus days and weeks flew by, and Pogram & Waddle, to whom the cargo of the Argyll had been consigned, began to grow nervous and apprehensive lest some accident had befallen the vessel.

They kept their suspicions from Tracy for a long time, for they understood the cause of his anxiety, and they forged a half-dozen probabilities that might very readily detain her; but finally, when she was overdue fifteen days, they threw off the mask and showed the young husband their despair.

"She left Southampton ten days before the Per-

icles," said Waddle, to Tracy, one morning, "and the *Pericles* arrived here eight days ago, and is now almost ready to leave again."

The hopeless tone of Mr. Waddle's voice—he who was always so sanguine before—struck a chill to Tracy's heart, and tremblingly he gasped:

"Then you think she is lost—that she has gone down with all on board?"

"I wouldn't like to say that," replied Mr. Waddle, "for few vessels perish nowadays that some are not saved from them."

"But wouldn't they have reached here ere this?"

"No, there is no reason to suppose that they would, for the very good reason, that, if the *Argyll* went down, and some of her passengers were saved by a passing vessel, it don't necessarily follow that that ship should be bound for this port. Perhaps they were picked up by a vessel bound for one of the West Indies or South American ports, and in that case we might not hear from them for some weeks to come, it might be longer."

"Then you really believe the *Argyll* is lost?" said Tracy.

"I don't say she is; God forbid, sir; but I'm speaking of the worst possible phase of the case, looking at the darkest side of the picture."

Mr. Waddle was proceeding to unfold the brighter view, when a lad entered the counting-room of Pogram and Waddle, and handed the latter a telegram. It was dated at Pilot Town, at the mouth of the Mississippi, and read as follows:

"The *Royal George*, from Liverpool, has arrived. Picked up a ship's crew belonging to the ship *Argyll*, which perished at sea in a hurricane off the Bahamas, on the 15th of September."

The dispatch was signed by the captain of the *Royal George*, and Mr. Waddle passed it without a word of comment to Tracy.

He read it through and through; then, as the spirit of a new hope warmed his sinking heart, he said, handing the message back to Mr. Waddle:

"I feel certain, sir, that my Dora—my wife—was saved, and that she is now at the Balize. I am going down, sir, on the first boat."

He rushed out of the office and into Poydras street, but before he had walked far he heard Mr. Waddle's quick footstep behind him, and turning, met that gentleman's kindly, sympathetic glance.

"Cuthbert, I followed you to tell you that your speediest method of obtaining information is by telegraphing down there."

Yes; Tracy had not thought of that, strange as it may appear, but now he felt grateful to Mr. Waddle for relieving him of hours of anxiety and suspense, and in company with the latter he rushed into the telegraph office and sent off the following:

"To the captain of the *Royal George*, Pilot Town, La.:

"Is Dora Cuthbert among the saved from the wreck of the *Argyll*? Answer immediately."

"TRACY CUTHBERT."

The young man took the message with a cool, indifferent air, spelled it over carefully, and, Tracy thought, tediously; counted the words, and asked:

"Do you wish to pay for this, sir?"

"Yes, yes; send it off."

"Fifty-three cents sir."

The young husband hurriedly pulled out his pocket-book and gave the clerk the money.

"When do you suppose I will have an answer?" asked Tracy.

"How do I know?" replied the clerk. "Perhaps he won't answer at all, or maybe won't be at Pilot Town, when this gets there. Call in an hour."

The next hour was a very long one to that poor stranger as he wandered hither and thither, trying in vain to keep up the hope that now only dimly flickered in his heart.

When at last the hour had passed, Tracy entered the telegraph-office again.

"No message, sir," said the clerk, at once, and before Tracy could speak. "The *Royal George* had crossed the bar before your dispatch reached her, and she is now being towed up to the city."

"When will she get here?" eagerly.

"Not before to-morrow morning; possibly not before noon."

And now it was only four o'clock. Sixteen hours more of weary, devouring suspense!

"What will I do with all these hours?" he exclaimed, when once in the street again. "To wander up and down these streets is torture; to go to my lodgings is no better."

He walked up Tchaptoulas street, unmindful of his surroundings, until he had reached St. Mary's Market. Here he stopped to rest and think a moment, and then he retraced his steps, reaching his lodgings just as a drenching rain set in, and night—an ugly, dark, rayless night—closed over the city.

CHAPTER XX.

NO NEWS!

In anticipation of Dora's coming, Tracy had a suite of apartments furnished in his lodgings. There were no grand displays of vertu, no costly draperies, no high-priced fabrics, but everything was characterized by a neatness in finish, and an elaboration in detail, that bespoke, as well as anything else could possibly do, the taste of the man, and the desires of the woman.

The poor fellow had had hard work to scratch together money enough to provide this home for his bride, and now, when he had everything complete, there was a possibility that it had been all in vain; that Dora's eyes—for which all had been done—would never rest upon that little home at all.

Tracy felt this as he stood in his little parlor, and glanced about him—glanced up at the pictures, at the curtained windows, and in at the cozy chamber, which resembled, in its comfortable appointments, the daintiest nest one could imagine; and he felt, too, what a terrible empty place the world would be if, on the morrow, his worst fears were confirmed.

He did not go to bed during all the long hours of that night, but sat up and stared into the fire, and thought, and dreamt, and conjectured, while the wind sighed without, and the chill rain dashed against the window-panes in fitful gusts.

At last through the curtains the gray, melancholy daylight stole, and then Tracy, unable longer to remain indoors, made a hasty toilet, and stepped into the streets.

They were deserted as yet, for it was quite early, and the rain still fell in a drenching, pitiless way that kept most persons indoors. But Tracy did not seem to realize the disagreeable aspect of the weather, for he trudged on and on, until he reached the lower shipping.

A few lights were glimmering from the decks of vessels anchored out in the stream, which, owing to the density of the fog, appeared like bright stars endeavoring to penetrate the thick mists.

It need scarce be said that Tracy Cuthbert did not expect to find the *Royal George* at this early hour, but had she not been due for twelve days instead of so many hours, it is doubtful if he could have remained at his house.

He turned back, going down a side street from the river, and by a series of short cuts he reached home again.

Breakfast had been prepared, during his absence by the Creole landlady, but Tracy could not touch a morsel.

After changing his garments he sunk down upon his bed and tried to sleep. The attempt was unavailing, however, and once more he ventured into the streets.

As noon approached he stationed himself at the foot of the old French market, and waited for the coming of the *Royal George*.

"The fog has detained a number of vessels down at English Town," said a seaman whom Tracy in-

quired of; "but now that the weather is clearing a bit, nightfall will see them all up."

"You don't look for them before that?"

"No," and the sailor walked off.

The clouds rolled away toward sunset; the blue sky peeped through the rifts, and the sun sunk lower and lower. By-and-by the vessels that had been fog-bound began to arrive.

Just as night closed in, the long-looked-for Royal George came in sight.

She was a stately, stanch vessel, and came gliding toward the very quay on which Tracy spent the greater part of the day, like an aquatic bird.

She landed in against another craft, and Tracy was aboard in less time than it takes us to relate the circumstance.

There was a motley assemblage on the deck—men, women and children. Some were laughing at the prospect of getting ashore at last; the sailors were singing loudly, if not melodiously, and some were viewing their new home through tears of apprehension.

Straining his eyes in every direction, he felt himself growing weak when they met not the object of his search, and it was with a faltering voice and hesitating speech that he asked of an authoritative-looking gentleman on the deck—who proved to be the first mate—if there had been any person saved off the Argyll named Dora Cuthbert.

"Cuthbert!" echoed the sailor. "Dora Cuthbert—what sort of a looking woman is she?"

"A young, girlish, fair woman," answered Tracy, eagerly.

"Ah, yes, I thought the name was familiar." The young husband's heart gave a quick, joyous bound. "But, are you her husband?"

"Yes! yes!" almost breathlessly exclaimed Tracy.

"Well, as I said, the name is familiar, because the boat's crew that we picked up tell a yarn about old Jack Atwell refusing to go into their boat, because there was a lady in the other one named Dora Cuthbert, who he had under his charge. And poor Jack, by doing that, you see, lost his own life."

"And the other boat is lost?" gasped Tracy, clutching the lapel of the seaman's coat.

"More than likely, sir," was the reply, in a tender voice, for the speaker pitied the man, whose agony gave his face such a rigid, deathly expression.

His sympathy, however, was thrown away, for Tracy was deaf to every sound, and, like one in a stupor, he stalked over the gangway and reached the shore.

Notwithstanding his air of abstraction, he fully understood every thing that had taken place; he understood, too, the full import of the terrible tidings that closed that day of wretchedness and suspense, and he knew, as well as a man can know, that the dull, aching sense of pain about his heart was threatening the very seat of life itself.

The lamps were being lit now, and ere he had gone far the darkness, aided by the fog, which crept up from the river again, became Stygian in its intensity, and he was forced to grope his way among the bales and barrels that lined the docks on every hand.

At one time he thought of returning to his lodgings, but he shuddered when he thought—as he did almost instantly—how lonely and desolate they would appear, now that he knew all his preparations had been in vain, and that the guest he had waited for so long would never come.

"I can not go home," he exclaimed. "I have no home; I'm a poor, unfortunate wretch who induced the only being who loved me to her death."

Then the picture of that perishing ship came up before him; he saw the pale faces grouped on the deck; the driving spray, the dark sky, then the thundering waters, and the crash of timbers, a pleading face amid the wreck; and then he covered his face to shut out the fearful mirage, and rushed headlong to the river.

He had reached the brink, and had divested himself of his hat and coat preparatory to taking that last fatal plunge into oblivion, when a stout arm grasped him, and Rupert Gaspard exclaimed:

"My God! don't do so rash a thing as this."

CHAPTER XXI.

DESPAIR.

TRACY did not recognize his preserver at first; indeed, not until Rupert mentioned the fact that he was the heir of Holcombe Hall, and was well acquainted with the history of Tracy's expulsion therefrom, did he return the kindly pressure of the hand that Rupert had given him.

"But, my poor fellow, has this thing settled upon your mind so heavy as this?" and he pointed at the river.

"Do you mean my uncle's displeasure?"

"Of course."

"Oh, no, sir; that set me back a bit, but I readily got over that, and was doing grandly, when this thing came to crush out hope and all desire to do, or live."

"What thing?" asked Rupert.

"My wife—my little Dora—was on the Argyll."

"The ship that was lost off the Bahamas?" ejaculated Rupert.

"Yes; she perished in the wreck; went down among strangers, and found a grave far, far from home and me. Oh, sir! it must be very terrible to die in this way!"

"Yes, very terrible," repeated the young Spaniard; "but there were a number saved, were there not?"

"A boat's crew."

"May she not be among the rescued? The names have not been published yet."

"No, there is no hope of that. I have seen the persons who were saved; they came up on the Royal George; she is not among them."

He moaned as he said this; but he did not weep—he was beyond that—his grief was too intense, his despair too deep for tears.

Rupert saw this, and approaching him, said, kindly:

"Mr. Cuthbert, believe me I feel deeply for you, and would do all in my power to drive this sorrow from you. Can I aid you in any way?"

"No, sir," replied the Englishman, grasping him by the hand again; "my distress is beyond cure, but I am much obliged for your offer just the same."

"But, do you need money—"

"No, no," interrupted Tracy; "I want only surcease from my agony—something to drown all recollection of my loss, and that only death can afford. So good-by, sir, farewell."

He made a rush for the river, and ere Rupert could prevent him, he had leaped into the stream.

Quick as thought the young Spaniard jumped into a yawl that, fortunately, was close at hand, and calling to an Italian who was guiding a canoe full of vegetables down the stream, to catch the man whom he saw struggling in the water under his very prow, he put all his strength on one stroke and was alongside the canoe in an instant.

The Italian sprung to obey, and succeeded in catching Tracy by the hair, but he could not hold on, and then Rupert made a similar attempt.

He was more successful, and, with the aid of the Italian, the would-be suicide was dragged into the yawl, and, by dint of a little rubbing, consciousness came back, but only for a moment, and then Rupert made the startling discovery that Tracy Cuthbert was a maniac.

Reason had fled, and in its place a horrible insanity reigned.

The first thought of Rupert was to have him conveyed to the asylum, but the next was more humane.

"I'll have him taken home to aunt Montlea's," he said; "it will afford Hester some gratification to be able to minister to his comfort."

Having determined on his course of action, he gave the Italian a dollar for his trouble, and told him to run up to the Algiers ferry landing and order a cab.

The poor fellow did as directed, and in twenty minutes after Tracy was helped into the Montlea mansion, where everything was done that could in anywise contribute to his comfort.

As Rupert had predicted, Hester was glad to minister to Tracy's comfort, and did so with such a hearty good will and sympathetic care, that Rupert was charmed more than ever.

It needed this duty, this severe discipline of the sick room, to bring out the depths of her womanly nature, and when a week had passed, and Tracy's reason and health had been restored sufficiently to enable him to appreciate all that his nurse had done for him, she felt repaid a thousandfold.

"Miss Corwin—Hester," he said, holding one of her hands in both of his, "we have been ill-starred, unfortunate, but we can console ourselves with the reflection that, whatever of pain and trouble has come to us, and others through us, we are free from any intention to err—have indeed been actuated by the purest motives."

"Yes," she said, dropping her eyes.

"You have placed me under a debt of gratitude by your care of me, that, be sure, I will endeavor to repay if ever the opportunity offers, but for the nonce I have nothing to give but my thanks."

She begged of him not to speak of repaying her.

"I am sufficiently compensated in knowing that you have been brought back to reason, and that my best friend, Rupert Gaspard, was instrumental in saving you from a fearful fate."

He shuddered as he thought of that day of agony and despair, and then they talked of Rupert, and finally of Dora; then Hester said:

"I don't think she is dead, even yet; for somehow, ever since you told me of her first, I can see her flitting before me, like a vision of light and beauty; and last night I dreamt of her."

His face lit up; a glow came into his cheeks, as he asked, oh, so fervently:

"And what did you dream?"

"I dreamt that I saw the Argyll sailing in a sea as clear as crystal; the sky above was blue and cloudless, and the great ship looked like a snowy bird, which, with full-spread wings, skimmed the ocean with its snowy breast."

"Yes, yes. Well?"

"Well, after awhile the sun dropped into the sea, and then a storm—oh, such a storm! dark, dismal and dangerous, swept up from the south, and the ocean, as if in terror, blanched as white as chalk."

"For a while the storm was so thick that I could not see the ship, but when a flash of vivid lightning lit up the scene, nothing met my eye save two boats struggling with the elements."

"Two boats?" echoed Tracy, worked up into something akin to fervor by the girl's earnestness.

"Yes, two boats," repeated Hester, "and one of them drifted off in the darkness, but the other, which contained Dora, for I thought I knew her, followed a star that blazed far to the westward, and then a mist came between. When it cleared away, as it did presently, I saw her standing amid a group of seamen in the loveliest land eyes ever beheld. Oh, it was so beautiful that it startled me, and I awoke."

"And what do you make out of this?" he asked, sadly.

"That she has been rescued, of course."

He shook his head negatively.

"Don't you think so?"

"No; I interpret it in a different way. That beautiful land is the Paradise beyond the grave; I can make nothing else out of it."

They discussed the matter for some time, and Hester, with a woman's persistency, at length convinced him that there was hope in her vision that, possibly, the enchanted island was more than an airy nothing, after all.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE DREAD NIGHT.

For various reasons we are constrained to go back to the night on which the Argyll perished. It was a terrible night—a night of gloom, of wreck, of disaster; a night fit to place at the head of a catalogue of terror, and one never to be forgotten by those who experienced any of its fury.

From dusk to dawn a tempest swept the Gulf waters as with a besom of destruction and its flight being from west to east, the peninsula of Florida felt its influence in the uprooting of trees and the overturning of the more frail houses.

Just as the sun dipped out of sight the Argyll passed Florida Keys, the light on the furthest point of land being clearly discernible to the watch on deck.

"What do you think of the weather?" asked one of the sailors of Jack Atwell, who stood at the binnacle.

"Not much," was the reply; "the air is so close, and that cloud out yonder is rather threatening; it has grown wonderfully large within the last half-hour."

"Always hate this coast," said the other; "it appears to me as if there is death in the Gulf Stream for me."

The captain coming on deck at this moment, interrupted the conversation by ordering every stitch of canvas to be closely reefed.

"We'll find the bare poles broad enough before many hours," he said to his mate, as he glanced at the black monster that crept up the sky almost to the zenith.

He was not a false prophet, for, ere the half-hour had expired, the storm broke forth in all its maddening fury, with a shriek like that of a fiendish legion, fresh from the revels of Tartarus. The masts bent like whip-poles; the sea swept over the decks in a blinding sheet of foam; and every joint and timber cracked and groaned as if the old vessel was a sentient thing, and felt that the hour of doom had come.

Dora, seated in her state-room, dreaming of the happiness that would follow her meeting with her husband, heard the first attack of the tempest as one hears sounds in a dream, in which consciousness is deadened by sleep. It came so suddenly, and so fierce, it was not until the heavy lurch of the vessel left her body stunned upon the floor that she realized fully the danger of her situation.

Staggering to her feet, she made an effort to reach the deck, but, before she had crossed the threshold of her room, Jack Atwell came bounding into the cabin.

"Don't be frightened," he said; "'tis only a black squall and will soon be over."

"But, Mr. Atwell, it sounds so terribly violent," she exclaimed; "don't you think there is danger of us going down?"

"Yes, there is danger, of course," he replied; "but it will have to last a long time or the old Argyll will weather it out. I have come down to gather the ladies together until the storm blows over."

"For what purpose?" asked Dora, her face blanched white as death.

"To prevent you from becoming terrified by being all alone."

"Where are the others?"

"In the captain's cabin."

She followed him along the passage, groping her way, for the lights had been extinguished, and finally she felt the pressure of a woman's hand.

She knew, even in the darkness, that it was that of the captain's wife, and she was quick to ask:

"Do you think there is any danger?"

"I don't know," was the reply; "the storm is a fearful one."

"If the worst comes to the worst," whispered Jack Atwell, in Dora's ear, "I will come for you. Don't stir, for your life, until I come."

She promised him she would not, and then he hurried away."

When his footsteps could be no longer heard, she fell upon her knees, and prayed, oh, so fervently, for a calm, for safety, in that hour of peril—that she might not be allowed to die there amid that wilderness of waters—that she might be spared at least to see her husband once more, if only to say farewell forever.

Not a word was spoken by the four women who knelt there in the darkness. It was not a time for words. Each was engaged in poor humanity's last resource—prayer.

The moments flew, and still the storm raged, and still the timbers creaked and groaned, and still hope fluttered in the breasts of the drenched crew who clung to the deck.

At length the crisis came; the Argyll had sprung a leak, and was rapidly filling.

"Man the pumps!" shouted the captain, as soon as the fact had been made known to him; "man the pumps! There is a chance yet."

It proved but a slim one, as the water gained fast upon them, notwithstanding their most strenuous efforts, and two poor seamen were washed from the decks into eternity.

"She's going, Atwell," said the captain, after a while; "you had better look after your charge."

Jack nodded assent, and ran down to the cabin, while the brave skipper shouted:

"Prepare to lower the boats and provision them!"

"Ay! ay!" was the ready response as a number of men left the pumps to carry out the command.

The wind was dying off now, but the sea was still running high, and those who thought of reaching safety through the boats grew weak of heart whenever their eyes rested on the seething, rushing tumult of waters.

"If the old creature would hold life until day-break, there would be some hope of a boat living in such waters; but as it is—"

He did not finish the sentence; the thought of his wife, and of the desperate nature of the risk he must soon ask her to share, choked his utterance, and he said to his mate: "What do you think of a raft, Osborne?"

"Well enough, sir, but there would be no clinging to a raft in such a sea."

"Do you think not?"

"Yes, sir, I do think so;" then Osborne added: "As for the ladies they couldn't hope for a place on it. They would be washed off, sure."

Yes, the captain assented to this, but remarked that the two boats would be so crowded that going into them appeared as hopeless as stepping into the ocean.

"But they needn't be, captain," replied Osborne. "The raft will do for the men, who can cling to it. I'd rather take my chances on it than in the boats, and I guess so would almost any of the rest."

It was so arranged, and in half an hour after, and when the Argyll was settling fast, the raft was completed and launched, with considerable difficulty.

Meanwhile Atwell had prepared Dora for the worst. She bore it better, much better, than he had expected, and in answer to his expression, "God will protect us in the open boat as well as on the ship," she said: "Something, I know not what, whispers hope into my heart, and I feel I am not going to perish so near my husband; it would be too fearful, too wicked to think so."

The old sailor did not smile at this evidence of faith in the goodness of the Master, as he doubtless would have done on an occasion less solemn, but acquiesced in the belief by a nod, and gave Dora his hand to help her up the dark companionway.

As the Argyll filled she, of course, became heavier, and, as a consequence, tossed less than at the outset, and made the traversing of her deck an easy matter, even to Dora.

The first boat was made ready to clear away, with

three days' provisions and six men in it, when the captain said to Atwell:

"Jack, take Mrs. Cuthbert in that boat; I will wait until the last."

"But your wife, captain?"

"Will go with me. Go now; there is no time to be lost. God bless you all."

They did so; and then the lashings were cut, and they were adrift. The waves took up their frail bark and swept it out of sight of the sinking vessel in an incredibly short space of time. Dora clung firmly to Atwell, who, in turn, wound one of his strong arms about her, and then—as if an omen of good—the clouds parted away to the west, and a single star gleamed through the rift.

The young wife saw it, and it made her strong of heart, but she did not speak, or point it out, to the seven men who were her companions.

Presently Atwell saw it, too, and he shouted out the glad intelligence to the rest. "The storm is over, boys," he said; "by morning we'll be picked up."

CHAPTER XXIII.

FLOATING AND HOPING.

It was three full hours before daylight yet, and the sea was still convulsed, and tossed its foamy wreaths everywhere, drenching poor Dora and her companions with clouds of spray, but hope, which had come with the gleam of that star, made them forget the unpleasantness of their position and nerved them to endure.

Jack Atwell was the first to notice a slight yellowish flush in the east that paled the stars and began to ripen rapidly into dawn, and he cried out:

"Lads, that's daybreak there; we're all right now."

Dora, whose eyes had been searching the sea and sky, clasped her hands together and exclaimed: "Thank God for his kind mercy to us all."

"Amen!" echoed the boat's crew, reverently, for, all unused as they were to prayer and thankfulness, they felt that this breath of thanks to Him who holds the winds and the waves in the hollow of his hand was timely.

"Here, Mrs. Cuthbert," said Jack Atwell, taking the wet shawl from about her shoulders, "this ain't comfortable now. I've got another one here in the box that will be warmer if not as pretty."

From the provision-chest he brought a great coat of pilot-cloth, with pearl buttons up the front, and huge lapels on the pockets.

"Put this about your shoulders," he said, tendering it to her.

She looked at his wet coat, which was soaking, and replied: "No, I can't accept your coat, while you need it so badly. I can get along well enough without it."

His face flushed, and a blush stole into his cheeks, as he answered: "Don't take me, please, for a school-girl, ma'am. I'm a sailor of thirty years' experience, and I can stand a little bit of hardship better than a woman—at least, I ought to."

Refusal being out of the question, Dora stood up, and the kind old sailor folded the garment about her, doubling it over the throat and pinning it firmly.

"It's not quite your fit," he said, with dry humor; "but it suits the purpose better than a Regent street mantle would, and so is just the thing."

"Yes, it is very comfortable," replied Dora, as she felt herself growing warm beneath it; and so grateful was she for the kindness so unostentatiously bestowed, that she could scarce restrain her tears from falling and her tongue from speaking out the gratitude that was in her heart.

Brighter and brighter grew the eastern sky, until all the waves caught the glow, and night, like a vanquished hero, drew off his legions of stars into the

far West, where they paled at last into nothingness, and were gone.

"Where do you think we are, Mr. Atwell?" Dora asked.

"Off the Florida coast," was the reply, "and not far either, for we are on the inside of the Gulf stream. You can tell that by the color and flow of the water."

"What do you think we had better do?" asked Sinclair, one of the men, and who had acted in the capacity of coxswain during the night.

"What do you mean?" asked Atwell.

"I mean, will we hoist sail and make for land, or lay by, in hopes of being picked up by a passing vessel?"

"Well, whatever you determine on, boys," said Atwell, looking at the rest. "We're all liable to the same risks, and can only pay one stake—our lives. So whatever the majority says I agree to."

Dora's faith in the ability of Jack was so strong, that she could scarce restrain herself from asking that he should dictate a line of policy for all the remainder, but her modesty prevented, and Sinclair said:

"For my part, I quite agree with Atwell that we are not far from the Florida coast, and if so that would be better than logging about here, waiting for a sail."

They all acquiesced in this at last, and then a youth named Cooper, who had not spoken up to this time, said:

"This craft ought to be put under discipline if it's going to get to land at all, and the first thing necessary is a captain."

"A captain!" exclaimed Sinclair.

"Yes; some one in charge whose orders will be obeyed by the rest, and who will divide the rations equally as long as they last."

Atwell winked at Cooper, and nodded toward Dora, which pantomime the former interpreted to mean that nothing of a discouraging nature should be spoken of in presence of the woman.

This understood, Jack assumed command. His first act was to order Cooper to prepare the breakfast rations.

This the latter did, serving out pork and biscuit to each. Dora refused to partake, saying she was not hungry, and would much rather wait a few hours when, she expected, the freshening sea breeze would have sharpened her appetite. But this proved a vain expectation, for, overcome by the exertions of the previous night, she fell asleep in Jack Atwell's arms, with Jack's great coat still about her.

When her heavy breathing assured the men that she was unconscious of what was transpiring about her, Atwell said:

"Well, boys, I ain't much in favor of making for land. The Florida coast is a sandy desert, at least I've often heard so, and the settlements don't crowd each other, by no means; so, what do you say to pulling out and depend upon being picked up, eh?"

"But we may starve to death. There are only one day's rations left," replied Cooper.

"Only one?" ejaculated Atwell. "I thought we had enough for six at least, with careful division of it."

"So we had," answered Cooper, "but the water got in among it last night and there's only a moiety left that's eatable."

Jack Atwell knit his brows, and for the first time a look of fear came into his face. The storm had no terrors for him, but this ghostly fate of death by starvation blanched his cheeks, and made him turn his gaze uneasily to the helpless creature sleeping on his breast. There was a deep silence.

Sinclair was the first to speak. "This is bad enough, but what is the programme? mark it out, Jack, and let us know it at once. Is it sea or shore?"

"That's what I was trying to come to," replied Atwell; "whether it's better to make for land, which it will take two days at the very least to

reach, in this craft, or whether it would not be better to throw all our chances on running across a vessel before sunset to-morrow?"

"Well, give us your opinion about it," said one of the crew, who had not previously spoken; "which do you think most favorable?"

"For my part," replied Jack, with great deliberation, "I would say keep afloat, and this for two reasons. In the first place, it will take, as I have already said, two days to reach shore if nothing should operate against us; once there, provisions might, and, doubtless, would, be as hard to obtain as they are here. Besides, Florida is alive with savages, and there are no means of reaching New Orleans unless by footing it, which is out of the question as far as the madam is concerned."

"Now, on the other hand," and he drew a long breath, which was half a sigh, "a few miles south of us lies the track of all vessels going to Havana and New Orleans. We would be singularly unfortunate if we were to miss a sail between this and to-morrow afternoon. Still, there is no telling; the hurricane that wrecked us may have swept as far east as Hatteras, and, if so, the prospect of being picked up is not particularly brilliant. Now you have the two sides of a gloomy picture; it is for you, gentlemen, to say, however, which horn of the dilemma is the most inviting."

"None of them suits me very well," replied Cooper; "but I say, stick to the sea; we know more about it."

They all agreed to this, and when Dora awoke in the blazing noon she was informed of the resolution adopted. Of course she could not do otherwise than accede, although she would sooner have taken her chances ashore.

A hot, sultry noon was succeeded by a hazy, golden evening, and still no sail appeared to gladden those whose eyes were weary with watching, or to cheer the hearts of those in whom hope had almost died.

Night came, calm and cool, looking down upon the waters with its millions of sparkling eyes, and curtaining in the scene with clouds of mellow haze; nothing broke the monotony of the music the waves made as they struck the side of the boat. No one spoke. Each was too busy with his own thoughts—thoughts of home and friends, which he had seen for the last time. Thus an hour flew by when Cooper cried out:

"A ship! A ship!"

"Where?" exclaimed all, with an eagerness that was strikingly in contrast with the stolidity that had prevailed but an instant before.

"There, to the leeward," and Cooper pointed to a light that gleamed off in a north-easterly direction.

"True enough," said Atwell. "Thank God for this! Here, Sinclair, get out the lamp, we may attract attention."

The lamp was found, but the wick had been thoroughly saturated with water the night previous, and stubbornly refused to burn.

"What's the matter?" asked Atwell.

"It's soaked with water, and won't light," was the reply, as Sinclair tossed the lamp back into the chest. "Curse the luck! She'll not see us at all."

"No need of cursing," put in Atwell. "She's gone."

It was true; the light could nowhere be seen. As suddenly as it came it went, and disappointment added its sharpest pang to the painfulness of the situation.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A GUILTY CONSCIENCE.

HAROLD HOLCOMBE was not as happy, now that he had Madge Moulton in his power, as he had hoped to be. The fact is he only changed masters instead of gaining freedom, and he found Byron Skittles even more difficult to manage than the woman, hard as

she had been at times, and erratic as she always was.

She was actuated by a poetic sentiment of revenge, Skittles by a practical desire of gain. The former could be baffled with promises of restitution; the latter was firm as adamant to every persuasion that had not money as its basis. He was insatiate in devouring large sums, and Harold, in the ten months that had passed from the night of Madge's capture, had paid him enough money to satisfy a half-dozen confederates; still he came back, demanding more, and larger sums, on each successive visit.

It is needless to say that Harold was thoroughly miserable.

It is a terrible thing to have the shadow of fear resting upon one's soul like a hideous raven, ever ready to croak out the secret of one's life.

Harold Holcombe realized this to its fullest, as toward the close of a bright September day, Byron Skittles ambled into his room at the Hall, and said, with a bland smile:

"Just arrived from the city; left last night. How do you do?"

He extended his hand, and Harold touched it never so lightly, saying, as he did so: "Very well, I thank you."

"Glad of it," returned the lawyer, depositing his large hat on the center-table, and sinking into a seat. "Nothing like health, sir—nothing. Gold is—well, it's mere dross when compared to the priceless boon of good health and fine spirits. Beg pardon, sir, but have you such an article as a drop of good liquor about? I'm a little moved in my stomach, and I think a mouthful of brandy would help me amazingly."

Harold rung the bell at his elbow, and Toy appeared.

"Bring a bottle of Port for us," he ordered.

Toy bowed, and was turning away, when Skittles leaped to his feet and grasped him by the lapel of his coat.

"Stop!" he cried; "I have no relish for Port; it's a devilish sweetish decoction that I don't take to. You have surely something better than Port. By heaven, I'd as soon drink slop Claret as your average Port. Excuse me! but you have Burgundy, or Madoc, or Sherry, have you not, my friend?"

Holcombe was thoroughly disgusted with the fellow and would have given a good deal to be in a position where he could have ordered him out of his house, for, after all, Harold was a great stickler for the proprieties, and despised anything and everything that savored of ill-breeding. But he could not afford to quarrel with Skittles, and so he replied, with evident disgust: "Toy, bring the gentleman whatever he orders."

The attorney noticed the tone, and was about to resent it, but, on second thought determined to let it pass. "Let it be Sherry, Toy—old Sherry, if you please," he said; "and, by-the-way, a cracker and—yes, you may as well add a slice of cheese. I'm hungry, for I slept during dinner, and got off before—"

"We don't serve lunch in the library," interrupted Toy, with a glance at the purple face of his master.

Skittles looked from one to the other an instant, and replied, in a quiet, significant way:

"Of course not; but this, my dear Toy, is an extraordinary occasion—eh, Holcombe?"

"Shall I fetch the cheese?" asked Toy, looking past the attorney at Harold, who now, worked up to a white heat, sat gnawing his nether lip, and working his hands nervously. "Yes! yes! let him have a pound if he desires it."

The servant retired at once, and Skittles resumed his seat with the utmost deliberation.

"You're out of humor to-day," he said.

"No; I'm out of patience," was the hot reply.

"What do you want now?"

"Wine and cheese first; after that I'll talk to you about a little business speculation I'm going into."

The wine and cheese having being placed before Skittles, he tasted both before he said:

"You can go now, Toy; much obliged for courtesy."

Toy went off, and the two men were alone. Not a word was spoken for at least two minutes.

"Well!" exclaimed Harold, at last.

"Well!" echoed the little man, wiping his large mouth with a big bandana; "I left New Orleans to escape the yellow fever, and I intend going North in a day or two if I can effect a settlement with you."

"A settlement!" ejaculated Harold. "A settlement of what?"

"Of our business."

"What do you refer to?"

The little man put down the glass he had been drinking from, and said: "I refer to that little affair that occurred so long ago that you can't remember it."

The old man shuddered.

"I want pay for my trouble in saving your life."

"Saving my life, man?" iterated Harold. "Do you know what you are talking about?"

"I think I do. Just let your mind run back to a night not long ago when I made a bargain with you in Lafayette Square. If your memory is good, you will remember that I had a client who wanted to hang you very badly. I stepped in and saved you. That client is now confined in this house—a prisoner, sir."

Harold saw he had a difficult customer to manage, and he determined to make an amicable arrangement if possible.

"Suppose I pay you your price, will you take an oath never to return to Louisiana again?"

"A dozen oaths, if you wish."

"Good. Now how much do you ask?"

"Twenty thousand dollars!"

The mention of the amount made Harold leap out of his seat, and caused every drop of blood in his body to forsake its wonted channels and rush into his cheeks.

"Twenty thousand devils!" he exclaimed. "Do you take me for a fool?"

"No," replied Skittles, rising too. "I take you for a rich criminal. A man can't take his money to the grave with him, Mr. Holcombe, and if you are hung for Gertrude Moulton's murder, it won't much matter what becomes of the wealth you leave behind."

At the mention of Gertrude Moulton's name, Holcombe felt his courage rapidly desert him, and sinking back, he said in a hoarse whisper:

"I've not got the money."

"But you've got plenty of real estate, both here and in England."

"But no available funds, I say."

"I've armed myself for such a contingency," answered Skittles. "Here is a mortgage on your property for the amount; all you have to do is to sign it. Not a hard matter. You see I'm always smoothing your path before you."

As he finished speaking he drew a long, legal document from his pocket, and stretched it out upon the table.

"But this would beggar me," said Harold. "I can't spare so much."

"I can't help that," was the answer; "I want the money; you can spare it better than your life, I judge—at least, I could, if it were mine."

A thought flashed upon Harold; a thought that came to him in his extremity like a ray of hope, and he said:

"I guess I'll have to submit to your demands. As you say, I can better spare my money than my life, and really I can get along without this—that is, with the exercise of a little economy. Hand me the paper."

Byron Skittles was surprised at the sudden change from belligerency to compliance, and, wondering at it, he passed the paper to Harold.

"I'm glad you exhibit such a thorough ap-

preciation of the situation, my dear Holcombe. Here is the pen and the ink. Allow me to mend the quill."

"Thank you; this will do," replied Harold, signing the document and passing it to Skittles. "There; is that satisfactory?"

"Entirely so," placing it in his breast pocket. "Thank you. Now I'll be going."

"Going!" repeated Harold, in surprise. "You surely intend remaining all night with us?"

"No, I don't," answered Skittles, with a sly, humorous wink. "I wouldn't feel safe in Holcombe Hall with this document about me. Much obliged for your hospitality."

He was moving toward the door. No time was to be lost. Harold drew a pistol from a breast pocket and leveled it at the dumpy figure.

"Give me back that paper!" he cried.

"No, I won't!" and quick as thought Skittles had out a pair of pistols.

The two men stood an instant eying each other, and then a shadow crept behind the little lawyer, and ere he could speak or stir, Toy had felled him to the ground with a chair.

Harold, uttering a cry of joy, flung himself upon the prostrate form, and tore the mortgage into atoms.

"What will we do with him, master?" asked Toy, hurriedly. "He is insensible."

"We'll lock him up in the tower with Madge. Come, lend a hand."

When Byron Skittles opened his eyes again, it was in the dark, narrow room where Madge had spent so many weary, weary months.

Groping about in the deep, dense darkness to find if possible some mode of escape, he came in contact with what appeared to him at first a heap of rags cast carelessly into one corner, but, on endeavoring to lift them, he touched a human face, and then he knew he was in the cell occupied by Madge, the maniac.

With a cry, he leaped back, and, as he did so, a ray of moonlight streamed in through the office in the wall, revealing the haggard features of the old woman, who had struggled to her feet, and was trying to pierce the gloom with her weak eyes.

"So the traitor has been caught in his own net?" she chuckled. "Caught like a mean, cowardly, sneaking dog that is afraid to meet its equal in a fair fight! Oh, you're a pretty, knavish, tricky piece of humanity, Mr. Skittles! But, you see, time has a way of requiting perjury and deception, and now your race is run. You can remain here the remainder of your days, and rot and molder and die like a beast!"

The cold wall, the blackness about him, and the knowledge that he was isolated from all the world, and possibly beyond human aid, had the effect of taking from him every particle of that combativeness which had been his main stay in former years, and so he fell to weeping like a very child, beating his head against the stones, and crying out:

"Is there no hope—no hope—no hope at all? Oh, Heaven and hell, is there no hope?"

"Yes, there is hope," answered the woman, with a devilish malignity. "When your frame becomes as shriveled for want of air as mine has; when your limbs refuse to bear the weight of your ugly body; when starvation and disease and loneliness and misery have made life unbearable, death will come tardily! tardily! and you will die piecemeal, as I am dying now!"

"Curse you for a fiend!" he cried out; "hold your tongue, or I'll strangle you."

"I'll not hold my tongue," she answered. "We're equals here, both prisoners for life. I was lonesome when you came, but now that I have the pleasure of seeing you suffer, too, I feel happy—happier than I have felt for many and many a long day."

He buried his face in his hand, and moaned aloud, while the woman crouched back in her corner and enjoyed his agony, rubbing her hands gleefully together, and chattering away like a hideous magpie.

CHAPTER XXV.

AT LAST! AT LAST!

THE yellow fever was raging in New Orleans; fear sat enthroned in every household, and death stalked abroad like a grim destroyer. It was a time of terror, and hundreds fled from the plague in all directions, caring for naught save health and life. Many of the districts were now denuded of population; business was entirely suspended, and the streets almost deserted, except where funeral crowds crept in apprehensive dread through the silent thoroughfares.

Tracy Cuthbert, although in a fair way of recovery when the pest broke out, fell a victim to its ravages, and for a whole week his spirit hovered between life and death.

Of course Hester ministered to his every want, standing up to the work bravely until Rupert Gaspard, on the fifth day, insisted on her retiring from the post of danger.

She unwillingly consented to this, and Rupert installed himself in the sick-room. The position was an odd one to him; to sit there, hour after hour, in the hazy, uncertain light; to never stir for days, with the silence deep enough almost to be felt, and this, too, after a youth and manhood of busy, bustling activity.

All day he thought of Hester; of how very good, how very patient, how very pretty she was, and when the evenings brought her into the chamber for half an hour, he felt as if she took with her all the charm there was in the apartment, when she stole off on tiptoe at last. Slowly, but surely, he came to the determination that life would be but a dreary waste without her, and then came the consciousness—vague at first, but more distinct afterward—that he loved her.

Days slipped by, and at length Tracy grew gradually better. He was able to sit up just a little, when one day Hester came into his room and said, with a great effort to be calm:

"Tracy, do you think you are strong enough to hear some news—some very good news?"

He looked at her, darting a quick, sharp glance, and then answered:

"Yes; I've heard so much bad that I think the slightest particle of good news would give me new life. What is it?"

"Well, now, you'll promise to be calm—not to excite yourself—if I tell you?"

"Yes, I promise," he replied, reaching out and catching her hands in his. "I think I can guess," he added, his face lighting up; "I think I can guess. It's—it's—Dora!"

"Yes, it is Dora," was the reply. "She has been saved!"

"And where is she?" starting up to his feet.

The door opened, and a woman, with a shriek, ran into his arms, and, glancing down, his eyes rested on the velvet cheek of his wife, all wet and stained with glad tears of joy.

"The sea has given you back to me, darling!" he exclaimed. "Thank the great God for his mercy!"

She said "Amen" with all her heart.

When the first outburst had passed, Hester and Gaspard came in and then Dora told them all—of how she had been rescued by the steamer Glencoe on the second day after the wreck—of how she had been carried to Mazatlan, and of how she and the faithful Jack Atwell had begged their passage to New Orleans on the brig Jessie Brown; and, finally, how, on the third day out, poor Jack fell sick of the fever and died, and was buried in the Gulf at sunset.

They all felt a tender moisture in their eyes at this, and Dora cried outright, for he had been good to her—more like a father than a stranger.

The third day after the return of Dora, Tracy received a large packet by mail from Havana, containing the will of Harold Holcombe, which made Tracy the old man's immediate heir to all his American estates, and with a letter asking his forgiveness for

having wronged him, and begging him to take possession of the Hall at once.

When he had read it through he called in Dora and broke the intelligence to her, and that same afternoon Tracy and Dora started for their new home.

Of course 'Bijah and his poor old wife were brought back to Big Brier Bend, where they resumed their old life and were happier than ever; and one day, early in the following autumn, a quiet wedding party assembled in Holcombe Hall to honor the nuptials of Hester Corwin and Rupert Gaspard. They went abroad; lived at Madrid awhile; then at Milan, and at last came back and settled on a magnificent plantation in Terebonne parish.

The reader, we presume, is curious to know what became of Skittles the false, cunning attorney, and old Madge Moulton, who for years had pursued Harold Holcombe without mercy. Their presence had never been suspected in the tower, and it was not until ten years after their having been entombed that an old negro, who had wandered up into the tower, discovered two skeletons—they had died hating and cursing each other; died of starvation amid a land of plenty; died a fearful, horrible death.

But Harold Holcombe paid the penalty of his crime against an innocent, confiding woman; he joined a lot of Italian conspirators who were plotting the overthrow of Napoleon III., and, being captured, was tried and condemned to ten years in the galleys. He lived but five of these, and now occupies a felon's grave. Fate, who is ever upon the heels of the wicked with a sword of flame, had tracked him to his doom; had hunted him down

WITHOUT MERCY.

THE END.

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Beadle and Adams, Publishers,
No. 98 William street, New York.